

Another Animephile Novel  
committed by GusDeFrog

Volume 1:  
A Very Small Beginning



Data Dragon Danika

# Data Dragon Danika

データ 竜 ダニカ  
Data Dragon Danika  
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Animephile:  
Kiri to Shinkirō | Mist and Mirage  
Takumi no Eri & Mizuki's Sky  
History of Love (short)

## ***Synopsis:***

***After a great deal of preparation, Danika begins her new digital dragon's life in a very small way.***

They say the "Living Jade Empire" creates individualized quests. They say it can read your mind. They say you can find your heart's desire. They say that there's never been a game like it, and they're right but... they're also wrong.

The game is a data mine, built to retell the old tales that humans have been telling each other since language was invented. It doesn't read your mind, but it reads your search history, your favorites, and your blogs. The "Living Jade Empire" is literally crafted from fables, legends, fantasies, and maybe just a bit of stardust.

But in the end, will the game be able to figure out what Danika wants most? Will the desires of other players take priority? Or, will playing it change her, until she desires what it can give her?

*A journey is always made up of many small steps, and this game has still only just begun.*



## ***1: 1000 Karma***

A notification flashed in the corner of the screen, "Level up!"

"Finally!" Danika muttered. She exited the game properly to prevent any last second data loss, and sat back from the screen and stretched. The sunlight that touched the carpet beside her was tinged with red, and fading quickly.

People claimed that "Living Jade Empire" had caused a lot of older games to be abandoned when it offered "Karma" for game saves from hundreds of popular games. Danika thought it had caused a resurgence in those games instead. She hadn't touched this account in over 3 years, but here she was getting it to max level.

This was the 12th game that she'd worked on in preparation for her brand new "Living Jade Empire" account. Level, equipment, currency, everything was added up and converted. The maximum conversion was supposedly 100 "Karma", but so far the best conversion she'd achieved was 96 "Karma" with a game that she'd played for over 7 years.

An empty account was still worth 1 "Karma", and the saves weren't destroyed by being submitted for "Karma", but an account could only be submitted once, only one account per game, and a maximum 100 submissions per "Living Jade Empire" account. Suddenly there was a new market for old game accounts and if Danika had owned a game company, she thought that she'd have been sorely tempted to sell off abandoned accounts that had no valid contact information on them.

She had already sold several of her own old alt accounts, and some of the oldest game saves that she had backed up in archives. It had been a toss up between submitting them for "Karma" or selling them for money, but when she'd reached 936 "Karma", she'd felt confident that this game could get her over the 1000 mark, and sold the rest while the market was still hot.

She held her breath as she submitted her last account to the "Living Jade Empire" conversion system. "Processing," ticked across the display for an annoyingly long time before the result finally flashed up: "69 Karma awarded for your adventures."

Danika's expression was conflicted. It was enough, but she'd really expected to get over 70 points. A notification from "Living Jade Empire" arrived on her phone. "1005 Karma collected, will you start your life as a dragon's child?" After a moment, she grinned in triumph.

The last of the light was gone when Danika heaved herself over the edge of the VR-medi pod that took up half of her tiny apartment. It was a ridiculously awkward and expensive device, and like everyone who already owned one, she made the excuse that it wasn't just for games. The system had better medical monitoring capacity than most city clinics, a more comfortable and adjustable surface than most beds, and of course, a better gaming interface than any existing console.

She frowned at the warning labels posted smack in the center of her vision as she completed the hookups. They might as well tell you that fire was hot. Maybe she'd order some cute character stickers to cover the warnings, if she had any money left at the end of the quarter.

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The Jade Emperor welcomed Danika back to the character creation room. "Greetings mortal soul, 'tis a fine night for adventures is it not?"

Danika grinned back at the extravagant avatar of the character creation AI and announced, "I want to start life as a dragon!"

The Jade Emperor narrowed his eyes at her and declared, "Dragons are celestial beings, you cannot."

Danika blinked at him in surprise. "But I collected over 1000 Karma, and received the notification!" she protested.

The Jade Emperor nodded calmly and repeated the content of the notification, "Indeed, you have carried 1005 Karma into my Empire, a treasure gained through great trials in many past lives. Will you spend it all to start your life as a dragon's child?"

Danika asked suspiciously, "If a dragon's child isn't a dragon, what is it?" The advertisements had all said dragon's child, with images of a golden dragon flying across the landscape. There hadn't been any posts about people not being able to become dragons after collecting 1000 Karma.

The Jade Emperor narrowed his eyes at her again, but this time the expression conveyed amusement to Danika and she wondered if he were really an AI. "A half dragon, of course," the Jade Emperor replied. He continued in rote, repeating information she'd heard previously: "There are no quarter races, only halves. Any half is possible, but not all possible races have yet been seen. It costs no Karma to start life as a human. It costs 300 Karma to start as one of the four small humanoid elemental races: pixie, gnome, etain, or nadia."

Danika interrupted before he could continue, "What are the half dragons like?"

"The most common half dragons are the elves. Dwarves, salamanders, and..."

"Wait," Danika interrupted again, "elves and dwarves are half dragons?!" This was a scam, why weren't there thousands of posts about this?

"Yes," the Jade Emperor replied simply.

"Wait, the publications said it only costs 500 Karma to play an elf!" Danika protested.

"Yes," the Jade Emperor agreed. "Half human races cost less than other halves."

"What about dwarves then?" Danika questioned crossly.

"Dwarves are half dragon, half gnome, and it costs 1000 Karma to start life as a dwarven child," The Jade Emperor replied, unperturbed.

Danika logged out abruptly, and rushed to the official site. She read through the limited official race publications again, and realized that nothing contradicted what the Jade Emperor said, it was simply that she'd had no interest in playing a dwarf and hadn't noted the cost. Only a few dozen common fantasy races were profiled on the site, and the human

animal half races such as mermaids and centaurs cost only 250 Karma. Human elemental half races such as goblins and fairies were only 150 Karma.

She raced through the login process to access the forum search interface. The first useful post she found was: "A Note From the First Dwarven Smith." The author said simply: "You literally start life as a dwarven child, don't choose to become a dwarf unless you've got a lot of patience."

The only other post that seemed at all relevant was one from UnicornLove, which said, "I never imagined unicorns as half dragons, and yet it all makes sense, the innate magic, the hooves and horn as hard as diamonds, the preference for kidnapping maidens. Not that I'd kidnap any maidens personally of course."

Danika wondered how many other people had actually managed to collect 1000 Karma as she logged back in to "Living Jade Empire." She'd been working on other games since learning about the Karma system in "Living Jade Empire". The game had been released for a month already, after a six month beta period, and Karma couldn't be purchased directly for money, but it could be earned in game.

Danika had simply assumed that hundreds or thousands of people would have already tried to start life as a dragon's child...

## *2: 5 Karma*

"Living Jade Empire" was one of the most successful and most expensive advertising campaigns in history. Millions of people began playing it within days of the public launch. Hundreds of thousands bought the expensive new hardware to play it better, and the more systems that were connected, the better the network ran.

Older games had been published on systems that made their money on the games, and often took a loss on the hardware production. "Living Jade Empire" boasted that you could play it on almost anything made in the last twenty years, as well as on the newest VR systems that were crafted with more expensive space born technology. Anyone could play, making the audience vast, and the demand for the new hardware grew exponentially.

The game itself was merely the advertisement for the new hardware, and for the power of the computer it ran on. That computer orbited the Earth on a path that neatly aligned with the first of its clones. The company that built them was dedicated to slowly dragging humanity up and out into the rest of the solar system. The game was designed to say, "Look how much more can be done out here, and how much room there is to expand!"

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The Jade Emperor welcomed Danika back to the character creation room. "Greetings mortal soul, 'tis a fine night for adventures is it not?"

"How many people have already started life as half dragons, apart from elves?" Danika asked abruptly.

"5," the Emperor replied simply.

Danika blinked in shock. "How many have collected over 1000 Karma?" she queried the AI.

"1,642 including yourself," the Emperor replied cooperatively.

Danika couldn't understand it. "How many of those are elves?" she questioned after a moment of thought.

"351," the Emperor told her.

Danika scrunched up her face as she calculated. "1,286 people have collected over 1000 Karma and not become half dragons of any sort?" she questioned again.

"Indeed," the Jade Emperor agreed, with narrowed eyes.

Danika examined his expression.

After awhile the Jade Emperor said to her her again, "You have carried 1005 Karma into my Empire, a treasure gained through great trials in many past lives. Will you spend it all to start your life as a dragon's child?"

"Are there any half dragons that even look like dragons?" Danika asked a little petulantly.



The Emperor's eyes narrowed again, and this time she was sure it was amusement. "Look into the mirror," he commanded.

Danika looked into the tall ornate mirror that stood beside the Emperor's throne. "A salamander," the Emperor stated. A small dragon-like figure wreathed in dancing flames stood in her place. "A race that is half dragon, half etain. They are very rare, and much sought by enchanters."

After a minute the image wavered and a blue serpent blinked dragon like eyes at Danika, mirroring her surprise. "A sea serpent," the Jade Emperor declared. "Half dragon, half nadia. They cannot travel long out of water, and feature in many nautical legends." It seemed like most of the elemental races crossed with dragons retained some of the dragon's form.

Danika wondered what was different about the dwarves, but before she could ask, the image wavered again, and a small armored dragon with vestigial wings took form. Danika regarded it with disappointment, it was the most "dragon" looking of the choices so far, but it had such a drab appearance, and it obviously couldn't fly. The Jade Emperor intoned, "A drake. Half dragon, half lizard. They are often mistaken for dragons."

The image wavered and Danika blinked as the little drake vanished, leaving behind only a sparkle of light in the empty room. She looked at the Emperor questioningly as he stated, "A fairy dragon. Half dragon, half pixie. Supposed by many to be a myth, but it has been recorded in the past as a wizard's greatest familiar."

Danika looked back at the mirror and realized that it was indeed a tiny figure that seemed to sparkle in mid air. Before she could examine it, it faded away and what appeared to be a dinosaur appeared in its place. "A wyvern," explained the Jade Emperor, "half dragon, half bird."

Danika glared at the vicious looking wyvern, which of course, glared back. "I'd like to see the fairy dragon again," she stated firmly. The Emperor waved at the mirror and settled back into his seat.

The fairy dragon sparkled back into existence. It was really tiny. Danika stepped up close to the mirror to examine it. "It's so cute!" she exclaimed as the small details became visible. The little dragon was perfectly formed, apart from having translucent butterfly wings instead of a more draconic shape. Little sparkles really scattered gently from the wings. She scooted closer to the mirror and touched the surface with her claws.

Danika gasped in surprise and fell to the floor as her wings stopped moving. The Jade Emperor chuckled. Danika was unharmed by the fall and quickly clambered to her feet. She stood up on her hind legs and peered over the lower border of the mirror. Her reflection blinked back at her, and she grinned. She was tiny, but she was a "real" dragon.

"How do I fly?" Danika asked the Emperor after a moment spent trying to flap her wings.

"Basic skills can be learned in the beginner's vale, now that you have chosen your race," the Jade Emperor declared. A fairy dragon sized doorway appeared in front of Danika. "Enjoy your mortal adventures as a dragon's child."

The sun sparkled warmly on a little stream that danced down the hillside that stretched before her. "Wait, what about my 5 extra Karma?" Danika questioned before stepping forward.

The Jade Emperor really did grin at her when he replied, "Yes, you will retain a balance of 5 Karma after you pass through the doorway."

### *3: Learning to Fly*

Danika only remembered that she'd forgotten to ask about what made the dwarves different after she'd passed through the doorway. When she looked back, there was no trace of it, only an enormous tree at the top of the hill. The first branch appeared to be several stories off the ground, and huge roots framed the borders of the vale she stood in.

She turned and followed the stream down the hill until she found a man, who looked suspiciously similar to the Jade Emperor in plain clothes, sitting on a stone beside the water. He leapt to his feet at her approach and greeted her cheerfully.

"Hello little one! I'm the traveling merchant. How would you like to be known here?" he asked.

Danika was a smaller dragon than she'd planned on, but a dragon nonetheless, so she gave the name that she'd crafted while leveling her old game accounts, "ZipZing."

"Zip Sing?" the merchant asked uncertainly. He withdrew an old fashioned brush pen and a scroll from the pack that he carried. He wrote quickly. "Like this?" he asked as he held out the scroll and displayed the neat characters he'd drawn. "Meaning perhaps: no song?"

Danika looked up at him and shook her head. "The first word is correct," she told him, "but the second word should also start with Z and have no space between them. I plan to zip through the sky like lightning!" She glanced over her shoulder and shrugged her wings before adding, "As soon as I learn how to fly."

"What an interesting name! Nice to meet you ZipZing, like lightning's flight," the traveling merchant enthused. The NPC appeared to ponder for a moment before suggesting with a grin, "If you want to learn to fly, why not try falling out of trees like baby birds do?"

Danika stared at the NPC for a long moment. "Are you the Jade Emperor in disguise?" she questioned suspiciously.

"Ha ha," the merchant laughed, "if you think so, perhaps I'll become the Jade Emperor in the future! I'm just the traveling merchant, I can sell you items that will aid you in your journey, and I'll introduce you to the mentors available in the vale."

"Can I really learn to fly by falling out of a tree?" Danika asked.

"Maybe?" the traveling merchant replied with a wink.

"I think I'd like to meet the mentors first," Danika muttered.

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There was a tiny village a little farther down the hill. Danika was a little embarrassed. She'd tried to run beside the merchant after realizing how slowly she walked in her tiny form and had tripped several times. The merchant had taken no notice, as though this was how every newbie character traveled, but Danika was still embarrassed.

"Do you have any idea what path of learning you'd prefer?" the merchant inquired as Danika looked around the tiny village. "There are three basic branches of learning: magic, combat, and crafting. There are three specialists from each branch within the village."

Danika turned and frowned at the merchant. "I thought it was an open system and you could learn anything?"

"You want to be able to learn anything?" asked the merchant.

"Yes," Danika declared decisively.

"Are you certain? If you don't choose a path, you can learn almost anything that anyone is willing to teach you, but you won't have any guidance outside the vale," explained the merchant.

"Ok," Danika agreed.

The merchant said simply, "In that case, I suggest asking the wood cutter to be your mentor while in the vale."

Danika asked curiously, "Does he usually mentor people who haven't chosen a path?"

"She usually mentors those who wish to become rangers, but anyone in the village could mentor you until you leave the vale," the traveling merchant replied. "You can only learn a few basic skills here," he winked at her and explained, "but she can talk to birds."

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It didn't take Danika long to realize that her mentor, Tiana Treebane, had a much simpler AI than the traveling merchant. The crotchety old NPC conversed with a much more traditional dialog set, and would apparently repeat what information she knew infinitely, if required.

The traveling merchant hadn't been joking about learning to fly by falling out of a tree either. Danika's mentor claimed to have asked a falcon she knew about the best way to learn to fly. Apparently the falcon had recommended kicking the fledgling out of the nest as the best method.

When Danika asked if there was a second best method, the elderly Treebane chortled. "There is, but I don't recommend trying it little ZipZing," Treebane told her.

"What is it?" Danika asked curiously.

"Falling from a falcon's claws after flying halfway to the sun," Treebane explained. She chortled again and said gleefully, "You'd splat like an overripe strawberry if you failed!"

Danika agreed to try falling out of trees. She soon discovered that when she jumped off the branch her mentor had placed her on, her wings would beat automatically, until she paid attention to them. The fall hurt a little, but not enough to make her afraid to try again.

Tiana Treebane insisted that after the first time, Danika must climb back into the tree on her own. Danika found learning to climb using her claws surprisingly easy, and became

quite dexterous at scuttling up the tree. She had to jump out of the tree several dozen times before she caught the trick of flight.

Rather than controlling her wings as though she were flapping her arms, it was more like controlling a windshield wiper, learning to turn it on, and then control how fast her wings beat. Controlling her direction was simpler, she simply moved in direction she wished to go.

Danika had been practicing flying for about an hour before she realized that thinking about how she was moving was probably the same reason she'd tripped while running. She dropped neatly to the ground, and then raced across the clearing. She skidded to a stop and laughed aloud. The "controls" were the same!

Treebane grudgingly congratulated her, "I see you've finally learned how to move around little ZipZing. Well done. Would you like to learn how to look up the controls for other game interface devices?"

Danika stared at her mentor for a moment, jarred by the sudden reference to other game interfaces, despite her triumph at mastering the "controls" here. "Sure," she agreed, after her brain adjusted. She looked down and clutched a fist full of dirt in her "hand" and then let it fall through her claws.

Danika gazed around the clearing again with new appreciation for how real everything seemed through the VR-medi pod interface.

#### *4: Level 1*

Calling up the menu interface turned out to be easy enough, if a little silly. It reminded Danika of the old motion tracking console games, with the way it required assuming a slightly artificial pose. She had to sit up on her hind quarters with one "hand" raised as if in greeting.

After a bit of experimentation, she discovered that it was possible to assume the menu calling pose while hovering in flight, but she really hoped that no one could take a picture of her while she was doing it. Fortunately, once the overlay screens displayed themselves, the pose could be dropped, and the screens were easy to dismiss when finished.

Listening to Tiana Treebane, elderly village woodcutter, explain the menu interface was weirdly disorienting. The menu interface itself was easy enough to understand for a long time gamer like Danika. The help section was limited, but had a clear bug reporting system, and linked to both the official game site and the online forum. If Danika had learned to use the menu earlier, she wouldn't have had to log out in the middle of her character creation.

The character sheet was... brief, and Danika wasn't certain she liked it. Her sheet currently read simply:

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--
ZipZing, a Fairy Dragon and a Novice.
Karma: 5
Reincarnations: 0
Accumulated Level: 1
--
She had three skills listed:
Flight, natural: 1
Breath, exhaust: 0
Dazzling: 0
--
```

The last snippets of information that the character sheet offered were a health bar, and an energy bar, both currently full. Neither bar showed a numerical capacity.

Danika dismissed the menus and asked Treebane, "How do I gain more skills?"

"When you choose a path, gaining points in your existing skills can unlock more advanced skills, you can think of it as a natural aptitude," Treebane answered encouragingly. "A master of the same path can sometimes aid you in your progress, and one who is specialized can help you learn specific skills related to their specialty." The elderly mentor's answer was not short, and she continued, "There are also legends of sages hidden throughout the world who can teach skills outside of your chosen path, or even allow an individual to walk two paths at the same time. Occasionally you will even hear about rare items that can transfer a skill directly." Treebane eyed Danika and added grudgingly, "If you don't choose a path, you'll need to find someone with the skill to teach you."

Danika actually found choosing a path more tempting after hearing that there were

ways to learn skills outside of a path, or even become dual classed. "But how do I gain more points in my skills?" she asked after a moment.

"Practice, of course," Treebane replied grumpily.

"What skills can you teach me?" Danika asked curiously.

Tiana Treebane actually wrinkled her face into a smile as she answered, "The combative path could teach you a number of useful things, and if you walked it, I might even teach you my special skill." Her eyes narrowed as she added, "But I won't teach a novice more than a single skill, and I won't teach my special skill to anyone who hasn't learned at least 3 combative skills and defeated the slime that lives at the bottom of the vale."

Danika pondered for awhile, and then huffed her breath out experimentally. Nothing happened. She asked her mentor, "How do I practice my breath and dazzling skills?"

"I can't guess how you'd practice dazzling, you'd have to ask a pixie or perhaps a wizard," Treebane declared. "The smith might be able to tell you how to practice your breath skill, I've heard he can breathe fire."

Danika was a little shocked when Treebane added kindly, "But perhaps that would be best left for another day little ZipZing? Even novice fairy dragons need their rest, not to mention elderly folk like myself. You've been here for hours and night has already fallen."

Danika looked up at the sky and stars twinkled back at her between the branches high above. The vale was still lit by a gentle glow that, she realized belatedly, was cast by shining flowers on the enormous tree that stretched above the vale.

Danika protested uncertainly, "It doesn't feel that long."

Treebane explained, in another of those slightly jarring moments, "Each day in your world is equivalent to 4 days in this one. Each day here is divided into 4 hours of light and 2 of darkness. Each hour can be counted in 4 bells. Our weeks are 8 days long, and our months are 28 days long, and our years 13 months."

Danika calculated for a moment, that made each year in the game about 3 months long in real time. It had been awhile since she'd played a game with its own time system. She didn't feel as though she'd been playing for hours already though, and she didn't know if she'd started playing during this day's morning.

Danika assumed the pose and summoned the menu, where she flicked over to the bio screen. It confirmed what Treebane said, she'd been playing for four hours already, and it was well past midnight.

Danika hesitated, because there was nothing specific she needed to be ready for in the morning, but then Treebane suggested, "Since you're using a VR-medi pod interface, I can put you to sleep if you like, and then the Sandman will entertain you until you truly drift off."

Danika gave in to her curiosity and agreed to be put to sleep. Treebane handed her an artificially bright blue berry to eat, and the last thing Danika heard before the world dissolved was, "Rest well little ZipZing."

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Flecks of gold gradually coalesced out of the darkness, into a vague figure the same size as Danika. She stuck her hand out and was a little shocked to see her original human hand create a swirl in the cloud of sand. The figure solidified into a jolly gentleman who clicked his sandy gold fingers and asked, "What would you like to dream of tonight my dear?"

"You're the sandman?" Danika asked stupidly.

"Of course I am," he replied with a tip of his hat. He tossed the hat into the air and it burst into a puff of golden sand that formed into a little song bird, and circled them both, before landing on top of his head and poofing back into a hat. He made a little bow, and said, "The God of dreams, the King of sleep, with the sands of passing time dancing through my fingers, at your service."



## *5: A Dragon's Strength*

When Danika woke up, she remembered the glittering sand that had become a golden dragon that carried her into a golden sky above golden mountains before she truly slept. By the time she escaped the VR-medi pod's clutches, the sun was well up, and reflecting brightly off of the building next door.

Danika breakfasted on a somewhat elderly bread roll, and fresh fruit from the chiller. The secondhand sunlight illuminated her morning exercises and tooth brushing. Even the most advanced technology couldn't do those two things for you yet. When she finished, she checked her messages, and heaved a long sigh.

"Living Jade Empire" would have to wait, because there was a leveling job available this morning. She was lucky enough to be able to support herself through game related work, but work was still required. Living in the real world cost money, and money couldn't be gained in any world without investing time and energy into its acquisition.

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By the time Danika returned to the beginner's vale in "Living Jade Empire", three "days" had passed. She returned in the morning of the fourth day.

Treebane took Danika to meet the village smith, where she delivered a load of wood, with mutters about novices too small to carry a useful amount.

The smith was a dwarf named Ivan Ironstone. Treebane didn't linger after introducing Danika, although Ironstone offered to sharpen her axe before she left. All of Danika's curiosity about what made dwarves different from the other dragon and elemental crosses rushed back, but the village smith refused to answer any questions unless she completed a task for him first.

The smith's requirement was simple, or would have been if Danika had been playing as a human, he wanted three buckets of water from the village fountain. Physics hadn't been completely abandoned by this game with dragons, dwarves, and unicorns, and Danika couldn't even move one empty bucket while flying.

After a bit she discovered that she was a lot stronger than she'd expected, when on the ground. She could push the bucket easily as long as she had something solid under her feet. When she commented aloud, "What is this? Do I have the strength of an ant?" the smith chuckled.

"The strength of a dragon," Ironstone corrected, while bending a strap of iron and fastening it around a wheel frame as easily as Danika could tie a ribbon.

Danika flew to the fountain to see how difficult it would be to fill a bucket before she did the work of pushing one all the way across the village square. There wasn't a handy spout, but there were two children playing with reed boats.

The hollow reeds gave Danika an idea, and she asked the children, "Where did you get the reeds to craft your boats?"

"They grow beside the stream," the taller child replied cheerfully. The other child pointed helpfully to a small bridge just beyond the last building in that direction.

Danika zipped over to the bridge and landed among the little patch of reeds. With a strength that belied her size, she easily plucked a long reed, but even though it wasn't very heavy, she still couldn't fly while carrying it. She sighed and dragged it awkwardly back to the fountain.

The children watched with interest, but neither assisted nor interfered. They giggled as Danika rolled a bucket from the smithy to the fountain, on its side.

Danika stood on the rim of the fountain with her reed, and stuck one end into the water streaming out of the decorative stone carving in the center of the fountain. The other end was positioned over the bucket, and she held that pose while the bucket filled.

When it was full, Danika hopefully pushed against the base of the bucket. It was much more difficult than pushing the empty bucket had been, but it did move. Danika had to stop a number of times on the way back to the smithy to move pebbles out of her path, and fill holes that caught at the bucket and tried to unbalance it, but she was successful.

After she repeated the process twice more, the smith said cheerfully, "Well now, such helpful perseverance and ingenuity deserves a reward doesn't it? You're too small for a regular pack, so I'll reward you with one of my storage rings." He lifted a silver ring off of one of his work tables and handed it to Danika.

Danika held the ring between her claws and looked at the smith questioningly. "How do I wear it?"

"There's a bit of magic in it," the smith replied, "just try to put it on your hand. Tap it with your other hand to activate it."

Danika pushed one hand through the ring and it shrank into a bracelet that fit snugly, but not uncomfortably. She tapped it, and an inventory screen popped up in front of her. It only had three spaces, but when Danika experimented, she could place a full bucket of water into one of the spaces, and remove it again without spilling any.

"Anything to say?" Ironstone asked after she closed the inventory screen.

"Thank you," Danika replied a little guiltily. She wasn't used to using polite phrases often in games.

"You're welcome ZipZing," the smith replied cheerfully.

"Can you tell me why dwarves are different from the other elemental and dragon halves now?" Danika asked.

"Only the gods know why, but if you'll pump the bellows, I can tell you the story of the first dwarf," Ironstone offered.

Danika agreed quickly and labored at the new task while Ironstone spoke. "Long, long ago, when the mountains in the west were young, a dragon who loved gold was collecting ornaments for its treasure horde. Over the years its collection grew, and it discovered by chance, that its favorite pieces were all crafted by the same gnome. The dragon eventually

captured the gnome over a course of adventures, that I won't bore you with, which span more than a dozen dwarven historical ballads. After the gnome had been held captive for a year, the dragon had become so enamored that it told the gnome that it would grant one request, in exchange for the treasures the gnome had crafted. Instead of freedom, the gnome demanded more crafting supplies. Each year the dragon offered to grant another request, but the gnome never left. Several hundred years later, the first dwarf was born, with the strength of a dragon and a gnome's affinity with the earth. Most dwarves instinctively have a dragon's love of shiny metals, and a gnome's skilled hands."

Ironstone turned to Danika after he finished and said, "And now, perhaps you'll tell me why you didn't ask the children to help you fill the buckets at the fountain?"

Danika stared at the smith wordlessly. He waited attentively, and finally Danika admitted, "I don't know, it didn't even occur to me."

"It's ok to ask for help sometimes," Ironstone chided gently. "You have done well at every task I've asked of you, is there anything else you could use help with that you haven't thought to ask?"

"I want to raise my breath skill!" Danika responded immediately. "Please," she added belatedly.

## ***6: A Dragon's Breath***

The smith chuckled and took down a huge hammer decorated with gold inlays off the wall above his work benches. "I'll only teach you one skill," he warned, "but I can teach you how to learn to breathe."

Danika frowned and replied, "I don't need to learn a new skill, I need to learn how to practice the one I have."

The dwarf looked down at her with a serious expression. "Learning to assimilate the skills of others will not be a wasted effort," he said. "Every novice should try to learn everything they can, ZipZing."

Danika was already planning to learn everything she could. She was hoping that if her breath was a combat skill, and she could learn two other combat skills, that she could learn Treebane's special skill. Her mentor's little taunt had sounded like a subquest, and the traveling merchant's warning that she wouldn't have guidance outside the vale, if she insisted on being able to learn anything, made her feel that she should take care to learn every skill possible while here.

"Does my breath skill count as a combat skill, and are you one of the three combat specialists in the village?" Danika asked carefully.

Ironstone laughed and swung his hammer above the anvil with a great swishing noise, and then told her cheerfully, "It is a combat skill, and I have got a bit of combat skill myself, but no, my specialty lies in crafting."

Danika hoped she wasn't making a mistake by not insisting on learning a combat skill from the smith, but said bravely, "Alright, please teach me how to learn to use my breath skill."

"Watch closely then," Ironstone instructed, "this hammer grants a breath skill, and I'll show you how to use it." He reached down and tapped her lightly on the head. A faint chime rang in the distance.

Danika stared up at the dwarf with determined concentration. He took a deep breath, and then turned and breathed a stream of fire into his forge. Danika frowned and took a deep breath and huffed it out. Nothing happened.

The smith glanced at her and chuckled. "With such a low skill level, it may take at a hundred repetitions for you to absorb a level, or thousands to learn a skill. But so long as you don't give up, you can do it ZipZing." He drew another deep breath and Danika watched with determination.

It didn't take a hundred repetitions, it took 97. Ironstone showed the inhuman patience of an NPC as he demonstrated his enchanted hammer's gift of fiery breath over and over. But then, the little fairy dragon that still concentrated, and huffed its breath in imitation with nearly the same determination at the 97th repetition as it had at the first, also showed the nearly inhuman patience of a dedicated gamer.

Every "real" dragon had a breath weapon, and the promise that she would attain the ability eventually if she didn't give up made Danika determined to succeed. Even a hunter

whose next meal depended on keeping an alert watch could hardly have done better.

Danika squealed with delight when a small cloud puffed out at last. She didn't really notice the sound of a distant chime in her excitement. It was like something had finally clicked on, and her breath skill could suddenly be activated with the same sort of intent as her wings.

Ironstone eyed the resulting cloud and said, "You'll practically have to blow it up your enemy's nose."

"Blow it up their nose?" Danika questioned. "Won't it become a flame if I keep practicing?" She eyed the tiny cloud which was dissolving very slowly. She took a deep breath and huffed another layer of cloud into the first.

The smith laughed and swung the giant hammer gently in Danika's direction. A faint breeze shifted the cloud into her face... and the world faded a little. Golden sparkles danced at the edges of her vision.

"What," Danika asked, and the word was delayed, "do you mean?" her sentence finished slowly. She looked up at the dwarf, who didn't answer right away. He simply turned and hung the great hammer back up in its place on the wall.

The sparkles at the edge of her vision were fading before finally Ironstone said, "It's not a breath of fire, and also, you're not immune to your own attack."

"Oh," Danika replied at normal speed. Her breath had slowed her, and it seemed to be an effect type attack rather than a damage one. After a moment she said, "Thank you for spending so long teaching me."

"You're welcome ZipZing, and now, I'm going to close up shop for the night," Ironstone said with a chuckle. He pushed her gently out of the smithy and shut the big stone doors behind her.

Danika looked up at the sky, to find that stars already glittered between the branches of the great tree. She assumed the pose and called up her menu to see how much time had passed, it was a bit after midnight. She switched over to her character sheet and gazed at it with surprise:

```
--
ZipZing, a Fairy Dragon and a Novice.
Karma: 7
Reincarnations: 0
Accumulated Level: 3
--
Skills:
Flight, natural: 1
Breath, exhaust: 1
Dazzling: 0
Assimilation: 1
--
```

There hadn't been any noticeable system notifications of her increase in level, and Danika was a little puzzled. Thinking back over the afternoon spent in the smithy, she

remembered the distant chime and decided that the next time she heard it she'd look at her stats right away.

Danika looked around the quiet village square, with its tranquil fountain and smiled a little. She was spending a lot more time in the beginner's vale than she'd expected, but it was actually pretty absorbing even though it was all very typical for a fantasy RPG: introduction to movement, a basic attack skill, her first inventory slots.

This game obviously had solo starter areas though, because "Living Jade Empire" was already far too popular for her not to have run into other beginners during this time.

Thinking of other people starting characters, she switched over to the forum and wrote her first post: "1000 Karma Character: Dragon's child advertisement is a little misleading, you can't play a full blooded dragon. I thought that was pretty ridiculous at first, but I'm liking my half pixie character, and the backstory on dwarves was cheesy, but actually sort of reasonable."

Danika submitted her post, and then logged out of "Living Jade Empire". She stared at the warning labels in front of her nose, and her brow wrinkled. She found that she actually hoped that she'd have more work in the morning. She really needed to get something cute to cover those.

## *7: A Dragon's Energy*

When Danika checked for more work first thing in the morning, she found a request for someone to fill an evening shift. She was tempted to skip her morning exercises, but... she didn't want to pay the price of that later, so she hurried through them instead.

When she appeared in the village square, night was falling and the smithy was already closed. Danika frowned up at the sky and hoped that the village didn't completely close up at night. She assumed the pose, and when the menu appeared, flicked to her bio screen. She set an in-game alarm to remind her to log out in time to work, then dismissed the menu and activated her wings.

Danika hesitated a moment, and then turned in the direction of her mentor's residence. "The farmer could use some help gathering up her escaped goat if you've got time ZipZing," the traveling merchant said from behind her.

Danika gave a startled gasp because she hadn't noticed the merchant. He grinned at her when she spun around to look at him. He stood casually at the edge of the square.

"Okay," Danika agreed after a moment.

--

She followed the merchant's directions to a small farm farther downstream from the village. The farmer was a sturdy looking woman in tall oiled boots. One of her two children was the silent child who'd been playing at the fountain, the other was nearly grown and helping his mother repair a fence.

"The traveling merchant said you've lost a goat?" Danika asked.

"It's not lost, just escaped. It's probably gone up the hill to raid the wizard's garden again," the farmer grumbled. She stood straight and stretched for a moment before adding, "But if a novice like you wouldn't mind fetching it back down, I'd reward you with a meal."

Danika wondered if that meant her character needed to eat sometimes, but agreed, "Sure, I'll do my best. What does it look like?"

"It's black with a white nose, but it's probably the only goat within the vale that's outside our pen," the farmer's son told her with amusement.

"The wizard's place is a round tower near the eastern edge of the village," the farmer added helpfully.

Danika flew quickly back to the village. She hadn't passed a goat on the way down, but then, the goat might not have followed the path. She remembered the round tower, because she'd passed it on the way to and from the woodcutter's place.

She didn't see the goat at first when she zipped over the garden wall, but she could hear a crunching noise from one corner. Danika approached cautiously, and finally spotted the goat. It was green with pink spots that matched the roses on the bush it was eating out of.

"Hey! Don't eat that!" Danika shouted at the goat.

The goat looked around warily, spotted her, and resumed chewing. Danika tried coaxing the goat, she tried shouting at it, she tried poking it, even diving at it. The goat ignored her stoically.

It finally took notice when Danika tried landing and pushing on its hooves. It shook a hoof at her warningly, bleated a complaint and stepped over her, farther into the garden. Danika glared at the goat.

After a moment she flicked her wings and darted towards its face and huffed a breath attack right at the goat's nostrils. It looked a little dazed. She huffed another breath, and then another. The goat stumbled as if it were drunk. And then she ran out, her fourth and fifth attempts at her breath attack did nothing.

An amused voice behind her said, "You're out of energy."

Danika spun, to find an elderly elf watching her. She was completely distracted from her goat fetching quest for a moment. The elf was a masterpiece of subtlety. He perfectly portrayed the oft described ageless but ancient look often attributed to elves in fantasy novels. His knee length robes were silken, but well worn, without being ragged. His trousers and boots were elaborately embroidered, but sturdy. His skin was smooth and flawless, his hair silver but full and long, his frame delicate but not weak looking. And his eyes... his eyes were ancient and knowing.

And then he tossed an apple at her.

Danika flinched as the apple bounced into her and her wings stopped beating. It didn't really hurt when it hit her, but she fell out of the air and bounced a couple times. She laid on the ground and stared up at the apple which drifted like a feather, slowly down to meet her.

The wizard laughed until he was out of breath. When he finally recovered his countenance he commanded, "Eat. Food will help replenish your energy faster."

Danika stared at the elf, and then glanced over at the still green and pink goat, it had sat down upon whatever was growing in the neat bed it had been standing over, but at least it had stopped eating for the moment.

After taking a deep breath, Danika clambered to her feet and asked warily, "Will I turn yellow if I eat that apple?"

The wizard laughed at her again.



## ***8: Advantageous Inventory***

When he finished laughing, the elven wizard sobered his expression and said seriously, "Of course not, at worst it will turn you into a housecat."

Danika stared for a long moment, before asking cautiously, "How long will it take for my energy to replenish if I don't eat?"

The wizard answered cheerfully, "If you stay very still, maybe two bells at your current level?"

Half an hour, Danika glanced at the goat who was already looking more alert, it was too long. Remembering the blacksmith's chiding she asked the wizard, "Can you help me get the goat out of your garden and back to the farmer?"

The wizard said, "I could teach you the spell that I cast on the apple, and it might help you do that? But I can only teach you one, and you need to have mastered a cantrip before you can learn it."

Danika frowned in thought. She was starting to wonder if every NPC had a special skill that they could teach, if you met the prerequisite. The goat, temporarily ignored, climbed to its feet, and approached the apple.

Danika quickly tapped her wrist and stuffed the apple into her inventory. The apple was very light. She activated her wings and flew upwards far enough that she was looking down at the goat, but not more than eye level with the wizard. "How long will the spell on the apple last?" she asked.

"About a minute per casting level, so hmm... about 15 minutes more," he replied cheerfully.

Danika pulled the apple back out of her inventory. She wobbled, but didn't fall as she held it. The apple was as light as a feather, but still about as big as she was.

The goat looked up at her attentively. Danika flew toward the wall, the goat eyed her for a moment, and then moved closer with a few bouncing steps. Suddenly, it leapt straight onto the top of the wall, cutting her off, and balanced as neatly as any bird landing on a branch.

Danika almost dropped the apple in shock, and the wizard snickered and advised, "You'd better fly higher, and quickly."

Danika said, "Thanks," and zipped up and over the goat and out along the path back toward the farmer's place. Everytime she craned her head backward to look at the goat, it was chasing quite nimbly. It was also still green with pink patches.

When she flew over the bridge that crossed the stream, she lost the goat's attention. The goat detoured down to the water and drank thirstily. Danika flew closer, and asked, "Hey, goat, did you forget that you wanted this?"

The goat blinked at her, and kept drinking. Danika edged a little closer with the apple, and suddenly the goat lifted its head and snapped at the apple. Danika barely zipped

upward fast enough to evade its bite.

The goat bleated a complaint.

"Sorry, but I need to get you home," Danika replied. "Come on goat." She tried to sound coaxing and told it, "come this way," as she edged along the path.

The goat followed her a little ways farther, before it stopped at a rose hedge bordering the path. Danika groaned and complained, "I know people say you should take time to stop and smell the roses, but I will run out of time!"

The goat ignored her, and nibbled delicately at the roses.

Danika supposed that it was rather impressive that the VR-medi pod could let her smell the roses faintly. She wondered briefly if it would also trigger some people's allergies. She glared at the goat for a moment.

The goat looked smug somehow as Danika edged closer with the apple. Suddenly, Danika flew farther away, let go of the apple, which started drifting toward the ground, and tapped open her inventory.

The goat eyed the falling apple as it chewed its latest mouthful of roses. After a moment it darted forward, toward the drifting apple. Danika zipped downward and snatched the apple back into her inventory, just in time.

She flew farther down the path and pulled the apple back out of her inventory. This time she tried throwing it ahead of her down the path.

Danika and the goat moved slowly toward the farmer's place in an ongoing contest to see if Danika could recover the falling apple before the goat reached it. So far, she was winning.

They were almost to their destination, when the wizard's spell wore off. Danika fell like a stone, as she withdrew the apple from her inventory again. She hastily stuffed it back in, and her wings lifted her back into the air. Her ring obviously stored things somewhere else.

The goat stared at her with interest, at this alteration to the apple game.

Danika flew a little farther down the path, the goat waited. She dropped to the ground and set the apple down. The goat eyed her with suspicion, but moved forward. Danika picked up the apple and ran as quickly as she could on her hind legs, toward the farmer's place. When the goat got too close she stuffed the apple back into her inventory and flew forward.

The goat glared at Danika when they arrived at last. The farmer called out from where she rested on the porch in the gently flowerlit night, "Good work! Now get into your pen Rosy." After a moment, the goat jumped neatly over the fence into its pen.

The goat turned and bleated at Danika. It waited expectantly. Danika reached to pull the apple back out of her inventory, and hesitated. The goat was already green with pink blotches, what if it really turned into a housecat if it ate the apple?

The farmer looked at her goat and commented dryly, "It's a good thing we didn't insist

that you bring back a black goat, but at least she's still a goat." She added tolerantly, "It'll wear off as usual." She turned to Danika and said kindly, "Come into the kitchen and I'll give you the meal I promised before I head to bed."

The goat, Rosy, bleated loudly, and the farmer laughed. She snatched a carrot out of a pail beside the door and tossed it out the door and over the fence, to the goat. Rosy snatched the carrot out of the air, and crunched it down, while staring at Danika reprovingly.

Danika left the apple in her inventory and followed the farmer. She was given a small loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese as her promised meal.

Danika pulled up her menu curiously before eating anything, her health was full, and her energy was about  $\frac{1}{6}$  full. She watched the meter as she ate a chunk of the cheese wedge, and her energy bar did rise slowly. It kept rising at the same rate for awhile after she stopped eating.

When it slowed again, her energy was about  $\frac{3}{4}$  full, just from the one small chunk of cheese. Danika nibbled a little more, and then stowed the rest in her inventory. About the time she finished, her work alarm notification popped up, and she logged out so that she wouldn't be late for her shift.

## 9: Skill Strategy

While Danika worked, she ran a second device and whenever there was a monotonously repetitive section that didn't require any real attention, she browsed and edited her notes on "Living Jade Empire". She created a chart of desirable skills, and added to them by browsing newer posts about the various skills people had obtained.

She was careful not to shirk whenever her attention was needed, and pleased to see when she finally finished her shift, that her efficiency rating remained at her usual steady 98%. Before she logged out of the system, she tapped a short note to the next person about which points of progress the account needed finished before submission, and a few other key bits of information that she knew would speed things up.

She was pretty tired by the time she finished, but decided to play for a little bit, since she'd found another post by UnicornLove that had encouraged her to install the mobile version of the game on her phone, and she wanted to try it out.

UnicornLove had said that even if you preferred to actually play on a more powerful system, the mobile version had a few very useful tools. The first layer of the interface acted like the companion applications of many games, it would let you check your messages and see if your friends were online without actually loading the game. You could also see what time it was in the game, and if you had any timed quests running it would show a counter.

Danika was surprised to find that the mobile version of the game actually listed a couple of ongoing quests: one to learn a skill from her mentor, and one to defeat the slime at the bottom of the vale. She wondered where to find that information when logged in from the VR-medi pod. Out of curiosity, she went ahead and logged into the game from her phone.

Her character was a tiny chibified version of itself, and she laughed aloud when she saw the traveling merchant as her character flew in an erratic path back to the town square. He also had a much simpler character representation, he was a little pudgy and his pack was about four times the size of the one he carried in the VR version.

He spoke in a text bubble: "Good morning ZipZing, your mentor said that she hasn't seen you for over a week. Do you need help finding her residence again?"

A list of replies popped up, after she tapped on his speech bubble: "Yes, please.", "No, thank you.", and "...enter your own reply."

Danika tapped enter your own reply, and her phone asked if she wanted to send it in text or voice, with the usual warning that voice required more data. She chose voice, since she was at home and had her phone hooked up to her local network.

"I'll go see her soon, but actually, if possible, I'd like to find out what skills are available to learn from everyone in the vale," Danika replied.

After a short pause, the traveling merchant bobbed his head cutely and replied: "You'll have to ask each person what they could teach you, so you'll want to visit: the wizard, the priest, the innkeeper and her daughter, the baker, the tailor, the farmer and her children, the hunter, and your mentor the woodcutter."

Danika chose a preset reply from the list: "Thanks, I will do that." A new quest appeared in her menus, titled "The Search for Knowledge", with a convenient list of villagers so that she didn't have to remember the merchant's long reply. The blacksmith was already checked off, since she'd learned a skill from Ironstone already.

It took her awhile, and flying around actually took more coordination on her phone than it did in the VR-medi pod. She had expected to have to enter her own dialog each time, but the game apparently understood her quest. A reasonably worded question about what skills each NPC might be able to teach her appeared in the list of preset replies at appropriate places in the conversations.

When she logged out, Danika quickly compiled the collected list of possibilities, and chose which of the specialists skills that she wanted to gain instead of basic skills, because she could only get five of those at most, and it seemed probable that basic skills would be easier to come by outside the beginner's vale than specialties.

Danika glanced out the window and saw that even the street light had stopped faintly reflecting off the building next door. She gave a huge yawn, and tiredly began the task of getting ready for bed.

--

The next morning Danika looked over the jobs available before breakfast, and decided to give herself the day off. She made a hot breakfast at the stove top instead of her usual cold foods, then updated her grocery list and submitted it for delivery.

The morning sun was bright and cheerful, but "Living Jade Empire" was still too new and interesting for the sun to tempt her into going out. After she completed her exercises and brushed her teeth, she heaved herself back over the edge of the VR-medi pod and logged in.

Her mentor greeted her with, "It's good for your health to soak up some sunshine once in awhile." Danika grimaced at this evidence of the game's nagging, and then blinked when Treebane continued, "Today would be a good day to help the hunter catch rabbits in the meadow."

Since the hunter was one of the first people Danika had decided to learn a basic skill from, that suggestion had merit. His special skill was a bow skill. Danika didn't think it likely that she'd ever find a fairy dragon bow, although before dismissing the idea, she'd considered that there were probably bow wielding pixies in the world. Still, her claws, while surprisingly dexterous, didn't really seem suited to the task.

Danika agreed, "I can do that, I just need a minute to look through my menus first."

"Sure, take your time," Treebane agreed cheerfully enough, although she added a bit dourly, "there's always tomorrow if you run out of daylight."

Danika assumed the pose, and then flicked through her menu screens looking for anything she'd missed that might contain her quest list in this interface. Her character sheet had changed a little, it now read:

--

ZipZing, a Fairy Dragon and a Novice.

Karma: 8  
Reincarnations: 0  
Accumulated Level: 3

--

Skills:  
Flight, natural: 1  
Breath, exhaust: 1  
Dazzling: 0  
Assimilation: 1

--

Finally she poked the small icon that looked like a decorative symbol near the top corner of all the screens. Her quest list popped up. She squinted at the icon for a moment, and decided that it did look a bit like a scroll. There were several more icons across the top of her quest list in this mode, but only one was currently available.

One of the inactive icons was obviously a link to her non-existent friends list. The active icon was round with little darts at the corners of the invisible box around it. Danika clicked it curiously.

Her menu screen was replaced by a large transparent lens. Treebane walked in front of the lens carrying a log to her wagon. Through the lens, Danika could see a label hovering over her head that said, "Mentor Tiana Treebane."

Danika turned so that the lens kept Treebane within its field and tapped the label. A miniature character description popped up, with the information:

Accumulated Level: 60

This elderly woodcutter used to be a famous mercenary with deadly axe skills, and a falcon almost as deadly as she was. After her falcon passed away, she retired to a quiet village to raise its great grandchild.

Danika felt like she'd been spying somehow, and quickly dismissed the screens. She asked Treebane where she'd find the hunter this morning, and then zipped off in that direction.

## ***10: Rabbit is Rabbit***

The hunter, Hildebrandt Highstrung, was a centaur. Danika did subtly feel that someone who was half horse shouldn't be a meat eater, but then again, most centaurs in story and legend wielded bows.

Danika spent the morning chasing rabbits in the sun. She would zip up to one, puff a breath in its face, and then zoom away before the hunter's arrow arrived. It seemed a little unfair to the rabbits. She had to remind herself that she ate meat in the real world, and that these were just digital imitations of creatures.

The sun warmed her so realistically that it gave her pause, until she remembered that one of the annoying warning labels in the VR-medi pod mentioned exposure to UV in its full spectrum light. After every third breath attack, she would stop for a minute and nibble a chunk of bread or cheese from her ring storage, to keep her energy high enough to do the next breath attack.

Danika wasn't sure how she was supposed to answer when the hunter asked her suddenly, "What have you learned about rabbits today ZipZing?"

She answered hesitantly, "They're quite fast and can jump a lot higher than I expected?"

The centaur chuckled and asked, "Do you think you could correctly identify a rabbit again if you saw one somewhere else?"

"Of course," Danika replied quickly.

"What if it was a different color?" the hunter persisted.

"I could still identify it as a rabbit," she assured him, thinking of the green and pink goat.

"What if its fur was longer, or it had shorter ears?" the centaur questioned.

Danika replied with a frown, "I could probably still figure out that it was a rabbit."

The hunter asked, "So what makes it a rabbit instead of say, a fox?" Danika didn't reply right away this time and he chuckled again and said, "Even if it isn't easy to put into words, you know what makes a rabbit a rabbit don't you?"

Danika rubbed her chin and replied slowly, "I think so, and I can think of a few differences between foxes and rabbits, like the shape of their tails, and their diets."

A chime rang softly in the distance, and Danika quickly called up her menu screen and looked at her character sheet. She had gained both a skill and another point of Karma since she had looked at it earlier that morning. The skill was called "Identify Animal".

Danika returned her gaze to the tall centaur who said, "I've taught you everything I can. I wish you luck in all your future adventures ZipZing."

Danika nodded after a moment and said, "Thank you."

"And thank you for your help catching rabbits," the hunter replied cheerfully.

Danika watched for a moment as he galloped off. He hadn't given her the skill she'd been planning to learn from him, she'd been hoping to learn stealth. She decided that she'd better ask at the beginning next time, and went in search of the farmer, who was the other combat specialist in the village.

A farmer wasn't someone Danika would have guessed specialized in combat, but when she reviewed the skills that the farmer would teach a novice, it seemed plausible since they were all strangely roguelike skills. She had told Danika that she could teach her knots, evasion, goading, or her special move, efficient swing, which she typically used with her scythe.

Danika chose to learn evasion, which she regretted a little after learning what her task was. The farmer had her feed the chickens by giving them one grain at a time, and making sure to give one to each before giving another grain.

Danika had finished off the bread while hunting rabbits, so when the farmer gave her a small sack of mixed grains, she was able to store it in her inventory. She finally worked out a routine where she flew up out of reach between delivering each seed. Her tail suffered whenever she was a little slow in evading the chickens who didn't get the grain of food that pass.

After she finished, Danika changed the order she'd had planned and visited the priest next. He restored her health and energy, and then kindly taught her how to call upon the Jade Emperor to use the skill herself. He also warned her that the skill would cost double the Karma when used on herself.

Danika thought that it really didn't seem as mystical when you'd already met the God you were calling on. She also wasn't certain that it was really the Jade Emperor's power, when using the skill cost Karma points. But then again, maybe the Karma system was just a measure of your standing with the emperor, since it was also used in both character creation and resurrection.

The priest kept her there for a while as he extolled the Jade Emperor generously, along with honorable mentions for the God of Sleep, the God of War, and the Twin Gods of Remembrance. Danika was afraid to ask if there were also other gods, and where dragons ranked in the briefly mentioned celestial servants.

Danika made her escape and logged out in time to accept delivery of her groceries. Then she made herself lunch before continuing, and scooted over to sit beside her few houseplants in the sliver of midday sunbeam while she ate.

When Danika returned to "Living Jade Empire", she continued her quest to collect skills. She needed to defeat the slime at the bottom of the vale before she could collect two of them, but she hoped to learn a skill that would deal damage before she tackled that.

From the farmer's youngest child, she learned the cantrip to make light. From the farmer's eldest, she learned his specialty skill, a spell that induced quick plant growth.

Danika had intended to learn fire starting from the baker, but a careless question had led to being taught basic plant identification. That didn't seem to be completely useless as



far as taking on the slime, after a bit of thought, as the baker had shown her how to identify several poisonous weeds to watch for when sorting herbs for flavorings.

The wizard refused to teach her his spell until she'd mastered the cantrip she'd learned. When she asked for specifics, she learned that this meant getting 3 points of skill in a cantrip. She had more bread from her time with the baker, so she started making a light whenever she could and nibbling bread every few minutes.

Danika learned stealth from the innkeeper's daughter, since she'd missed her chance to learn it from the hunter. She regretted giving up the chance to learn to swim, but the ability to move quietly and unnoticed seemed like it would be useful in more environments. She had even managed to keep practicing her light skill during part of her training, by randomly casting it as far from herself as she could.

## 11: Why Slimes Carry Pocket Money

The last skill Danika gained before seeking out the slime at the bottom of the vale, was one from the tailor. He taught her binding, which he used on hems with thread and needle, but since it was basically a knotting skill it could also be used to bind larger things together with larger strings.

Learning binding made Danika wonder what would have happened if she'd tied a knot without the skill. She looked it up while eating bread, cheese and apples for supper. She was still afraid to eat the apple she had in the game.

According to other players, those accessing the game through VR could actually do things like tie knots without any skill proficiency. However, using real world skills without having a related skill on your character sheet wouldn't improve the skill if you obtained it later. No one had yet reported having taught themselves a skill directly, although a number of people had learned branching skills in their chosen path, apparently triggered by using related real world skills in combination with their path skill.

Her character sheet before her battle with the slime read:

--

ZipZing, a Fairy Dragon and a Novice.

Karma: 14

Reincarnations: 0

Accumulated Level: 11

--

Skills:

Flight, natural: 1

Breath, exhaust: 1

Dazzling: 0

Light, cantrip: 1

Plant Growth, spell: 1

Restore, prayer: 1

Binding String: 1

Stealth: 1

Evasion: 1

Identify Animal: 1

Identify Plant: 1

Assimilation: 1

--

Danika returned to the game and descended cautiously farther down the vale than she'd yet explored. She had the wizard's apple, half a large loaf of bread from the baker, and a spool of sturdy thread from the tailor in her storage ring inventory.

She continued practicing making lights along the way. The duration was equivalent to her skill, so the lights faded before she'd moved very far from each one. Before she reached the bottom of the vale, she heard that soft distant chime again, and stopped to pull up her character sheet again. Her light had gained a level.

The vale narrowed toward the bottom and cut downward between rocky cliffs that rose like a pair of stones that the giant roots of the great tree had shoved out of the ground an age ago.

There was a narrow passage between the two large stones, and in the center sat what had to be the slime. Danika wondered if it had a cute appearance in the mobile interface, here it looked a lot like a big slimy slug.

The slime didn't have eyes, like many illustrations of slimes portrayed. Something like a shiny coin glittered from the center of its gelatinous mass. It didn't look like it breathed, and she wasn't sure that she'd even be able to tell if it had been slowed anyway, it wasn't moving very fast.

A resounding thump rang off the stone suddenly, and the slime sort of dissolved into the rock and vanished. A moment later the traveling merchant walked through the gap. Danika stared at him in surprise.

The merchant winked at her. Danika rolled her eyes and asked, "Why do I need to defeat the slime if you can just scare it away like that?"

The traveling merchant turned and watched the slime sliding out of the stone. "For money?" he suggested.

"Why does it have money? That really is a coin in the center?" Danika questioned. As an after thought she added another, "How did it carry the coin into the stone when it ...uh, dissolved its way in?"

The merchant grinned and replied, "I can't answer the last one, magic? It is, and it isn't a coin, it's the slime's heart. It also contains the metals the slime extracts from the ore in the rock it travels through. Almost all mining is done by slimes, flocks of them are raised around good deposits in the stone and are harvested when grown."

"The coins of the Jade Empire are slime hearts?" Danika asked uncertainly.

"It's the most common currency on land," the merchant informed her, "but mermaids and other sea folk generally prefer their traditional shells." He looked at her dubious expression and added, "You might think that means money is free on many beaches, but the shells that commonly wash up are perhaps equivalent to a penny in your world."

Danika shook her head and asked the critical question, "How are slimes harvested?"

"Every mining ranch and slime hunter has their own tactics, I couldn't possibly list them all to you in any reasonable amount of time," the merchant informed her with evident amusement. "However, most beginners simply cut them apart when they come out of the rock to clarify themselves in the sun."

"How can someone my size cut that apart!?" Danika asked with dismay.

The merchant squinted at her and replied cheerfully, "Oh, I'm sure you'll be able to do such a thing eventually, but for now I suppose you'll have to come up with an alternative." With that, he departed for the village.

Danika considered chasing him, but decided that it was already fairly clear that the traveling merchant wasn't going to help her defeat the slime, and she needed to do it herself. She studied the slime for awhile, before she thought to use the lens from her menu system on it.

She quickly pulled up her menu and clicked the two icons required to bring up the lens. Through the lens the slime had a tag on it. It was more informative than the title of her mentor had been, it read: "Slime: Level 3, Health excellent." When she tapped on it, it expanded to read: "Identification: Classified as both plant and animal. 99% water, 1% heavy metals. Grows cloudy after feeding on metals, must charge in sunlight to condense metals into its heart coin. Extremely flexible, can pass through stone and earth."

Danika felt trapped in a conundrum. The skill she could learn from her mentor after she defeated the slime had the potential to be extremely good against slimes, but first she had to defeat the slime...

## ***12: The Battle for its Heart***

Danika tried breathing on the slime, just in case it had some effect that she hadn't expected. The slime didn't appear to notice, but a soft chime indicated that she'd finally leveled up her breath skill. She breathed on the slime again, with no difference beyond perhaps a slight increase in the size of her breath cloud.

Next she tried poking it with a sharp stick while standing on the ground, hoping that maybe if she pierced its skin, it would leak all its fluid out. She wasn't certain if she managed to pierce it before the slime retreated into the rock wall for longer than it had when the merchant scared it with the resounding thump.

Curiosity called Danika through the passage between the enormous stones. There was only a small clearing walled by the roots of the great tree. In the center of the clearing was a standing ring, that was definitely some sort of portal, judging by the way the well worn path ended. She tried flying up and over roots, but there was an impassable wall of fog beyond the roots. Everytime Danika tried to fly into it, she shortly found herself flying back out of it.

She returned to the stone walled passage to wait for the slime's return. She nibbled some bread, and cast her light here and there while she waited. It lasted a little longer, but didn't seem any brighter. Finally the slime returned.

When it was half in, and half out of the stone wall, she cast her plant growth spell on it. The slime visibly increased in size a bit, but otherwise showed no reaction, and simply continued sliding smoothly out of the stone. Then it just laid there, shimmering a little in the sun like a gelatin dessert. If she wasn't poking it, it didn't seem to be aware of her presence at all, and there was not even a mark from her attempt.

Danika gave up and returned to town to ask the baker for some salt. Salt worked on earthy slugs, and killed plants as well. The baker agreed to give her some, but had her help make pretzels in exchange. She used her bind skill to tie the knots, figuring that she might as well get practice with it. By the time she finished and had acquired the small sack of salt, she'd finished off her bread and there was room in her storage ring for it.

On her way back to the bottom of the vale, Danika collected poisonous weed seeds wherever she could. She used her bind skill with her thread to tie the seeds into a long chain that dangled as she flew. Eventually she had collected so many that they were too heavy to fly with, and she had to wrap them around herself and run on foot.

Thankfully there was still enough sun left that the slime was still lounging in the gap. Danika hurriedly placed her seeds in every crack and crevice on either side of the slime. Then she started casting her plant growth spell again, on the seeds this time, instead of the slime.

She had managed to induce most of the seeds to grow a bit before she ran completely out of energy and the cheese to replenish it faster. She flew high above the slime and started sprinkling salt as the weight of the sack pulled her down. It didn't take long for the slime to react, and it slid toward the rock wall.

It sort of bounced off the layer of young weeds, and slid toward the wall on the other side of the passage, while Danika continued sprinkling it with salt as she fell toward it. The

slime ran into the new plants on the other side, and began sliding along the wall, looking for bare stone.

Danika didn't stop when she reached the slime, instead she landed on it, and began trying to grind the remaining salt into its surface with her dragon strength. The slime reacted by suddenly absorbing her.

Danika was shocked, but she didn't panic. She held her breath and struggled toward the coin shaped heart at the center of the slime. She wished she'd chosen swimming instead of stealth, but she knew how to swim a little outside of the game, and like people who tied knots without knot skills while in VR, she was able to make progress toward the coin heart.

When she reached it, she ground her last clawfull of salt into the veiny tissues around the coin heart. The whole slime shuddered and shook, and Danika was hard pressed not to gasp for breath. She almost drowned before the slime collapsed enough for her to tear her way out of its tough skin with her claws. She lay on the ground beside its collapsing form, coughing and gasping for air for awhile.

When she summoned enough energy to call up the menu, her health was a sliver, and her energy the tiniest speck. She wished she'd grown something edible instead of only poisonous weeds along the walls. She didn't want to use up her Karma on a restore prayer unless she had to, so she waited as motionlessly as possible beside the remains of the slime, which seemed to be quickly turning into a thin skin and a coin lying on a wet patch of ground.

Danika looked at the scrubby groundcover growing determinedly in patches across the path and silently thanked it for growing there. She'd forgotten to cover the ground with poisonous weeds, but the slime hadn't escaped downward.

By the time she'd recovered about ¼ of her health and energy, night had fallen. Danika gathered up the coin, and after a moment of thought put it and the remainder of her thread into the empty salt sack, which had mostly dried, before she placed it into her inventory. She barely hesitated before stuffing the translucent skin into her inventory as well.

This experience of nearly drowning inside the slime seemed maybe a little too realistic for Danika, and she felt beyond tired. Instead of flying back to the village to collect her rewards, she logged out.

### ***13: Warning : Kitten***

Danika hadn't expected to sleep easily, but she slept well that night. She woke up to see the warning labels staring her in the face though. She crawled over the side of the VR-medi pod and landed with a thump. She was determined that if there was work available today, she was taking it, and ordering stickers.

She exercised, breakfasted and washed up before looking. There was a decent job waiting. Danika jumped into it with as much determination as if it had been a quest promising an exclusive pet of the cutest kind.

While she ate lunch she browsed stickers until she stumbled upon a large decal of a particularly fluffy kitten in a wizard's hat cuddled within the curve of a sleeping dragon. It was too cute, and she ordered it without a second thought. Unfortunately, it shipped from overseas and would be in transit for at least two weeks.

--

When Danika logged back into "Living Jade Empire" after she finished working it was still nighttime, or rather, it was night again. She cast her level 2 light, and noticed something that she hadn't before: the core of the light spell seemed to contain two tiny particles.

She peered closely into the light and they separated from each other so that she could see them more clearly and then vanished as the cantrip timed out. She blinked, seeing nothing but a fading dazzle for a moment, and then her eyes readjusted.

Danika called the light again and found that she really could move the two tiny particles of light that appeared apart from each other. For that matter she could also move them around together. The duration was too short to really play with them, and she discovered quickly that she had already run herself out of energy.

She assumed the pose and flicked over to the forums. No matter what search she tried, she couldn't find any mention of the light cantrip creating individual particles. There was a close up screenshot in "A Guide to Wizardry" though, that clearly showed at least a half dozen particles around a denser core.

That guide also mentioned that the summoned light could be moved anywhere within line of sight, although there was no mention of being able to move the particles individually. It helpfully included the information that the spell leveled at a flat rate. It gained exactly one second in duration per level, and a tiny, but consistent increase in size.

Danika was fairly certain that the increase in size would turn out to be one particle per level. No upper limit to leveling any cantrip had been discovered yet, although it took more time practicing to gain each additional level according to the writer.

Danika dismissed her menu screens and blinked. Two tiny lights were hovering in the bush directly in front of her. She hadn't cast her spell there, and it had long expired anyway. Hesitantly, she called out, "hello?"

The lights vanished. After a minute, Danika started up the path to the village. The soft glow of the flowers in the enormous tree high overhead seemed dimmer than usual, but she thought that dawn should only be about 30 minutes away, or rather two bells in game

context.

A few minutes later, Danika saw the two little lights again. She didn't stop this time, but simply flew a little faster along the path. A rustling seemed to echo from the dim surroundings. A little farther along, she heard a strange scratching noise ahead where the path curved, and the lights appeared again, hovering above the branch of a small fruit tree growing beside the path.

Danika slowed her flight and hovered there a moment, watching them. Somehow they resembled eyes. She tried edging closer to them, and the lights vanished again.

Danika felt a little creeped out. None of the NPC's in the vale had ever mentioned predators near the vale, but no one had said that there weren't any either. She zipped along the path faster, and had gotten maybe 30 feet from where the lights had been, when she heard a faint and plaintive "mew" from behind her.

Danika spun and looked back warily. The lights had returned, tiny and faint in the distance, still hovering above the branch. She hesitated, and then, the unhappy little "mew" repeated. She flew cautiously back toward the little lights, they vanished again, but returned a moment later as she watched. The "mew" repeated, with a more demanding ring to it.

As Danika approached the little lights more closely in the dim light, she could finally make out the shape of the half grown cat perched on the fruit tree branch. She heaved a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Danika liked cats, although she'd never dared get one as a pet, since her mother had disapproved of keeping animals in captivity. Now that she was on her own, she could have gotten one, but she lived in a one room apartment. However, a real cat's eyes only reflected light, they didn't create it.

The cat itself looked normal enough, it had short dark fur of an indeterminate color, but its glowing eyes were still a little creepy. She craned her neck around to look behind herself, and saw that in the gloom the tiny sparkles that scattered off her own wings were brighter than they normally appeared.

Danika looked back at the cat and laughed. It was her own faint glow being reflected in the young cat's eyes. The cat clung to the trunk of the tree with the claws of one forepaw and tried to stretch the other down to the next branch. It couldn't quite reach, and emitted another plaintive "mew".

Danika asked it a little plaintively in return, "What do you want me to do about it? You're a little bigger than I am!"

The cat just looked at her expectantly. If she'd already learned the wizard's spell that made the apple lighter, she could have helped the cat get down, but she didn't see what she could do for it at the moment.

After a moment Danika tried landing on the branch below the cat and making coaxing noises with her forearms held out like she expected to catch it. The cat stretched toward her and she gazed at it hopefully, until it swatted at her and knocked her off the branch.

Danika bounced a couple of times, and then quickly righted herself. She activated her wings and rose back up to the cat's eye level, where she glared at it and asked accusingly,



"You belong to that wizard don't you?"

The cat gave a noncommittal "mew" in reply and watched Danika with interest.

Danika pulled up her character sheet and decided that she probably had regained just enough energy to cast her light once more. She shifted her position so that she could see both the cat, and the other side of the trunk of the little tree from it.

She cast her little two second light right in front of the cat's nose, and then made it zip downward around and behind the tree just before it vanished. The cat jumped without hesitation, down to the branch where it could look behind the tree where the light had gone. It gave another plaintive "mew" and stared back at Danika.

Danika rolled her eyes at it. She couldn't cast her light again, but she decided to trust in her evasion skill, and maybe just a little in the restore prayer to the Jade Emperor. She zipped down and circled the trunk below the cat before landing on the ground behind the trunk of the little fruit tree.

The young cat bounded downward gleefully. It hit the ground beside her, and Danika launched herself back into the air just before the overgrown kitten pounced. The chickens had been good practice.

Danika stared down at it for a moment with exasperation. It gazed up at her, with its wide eyes reflecting two little points of light. It was really cute.

Danika couldn't stay irritated with it, but she turned away from it anyway, and zipped quickly toward the village. The sky was just beginning to lighten, and she hoped that woodcutters woke up early. The occasional rustle of a fast moving cat paced her for a little while, but faded away as she flew past the wizard's tower.

Danika snorted. "Ha, I knew it," she whispered.

## ***14: Reward and Temptation***

Treebane was up and about already when Danika reached her clearing. Danika displayed the coin and the membrane from the slime to prove that she'd defeated it.

Tiana Treebane asked a little querulously, "Why did you save its skin? What are you planning to do with it?"

Danika blinked and thought for a moment before replying, "Umm, it seems like a pretty strong and flexible material, maybe it would make a good sack?"

Treebane shook her head and replied dourly, "Not unless you preserve it somehow, otherwise it will keep decaying every time you expose it to the air."

Danika hastily stuffed the translucent skin back into her inventory, and then looked at her mentor expectantly. "Please teach me your special wind slash?" she asked politely.

Treebane sniffed and said, "Yes yes, your reward for a slime well defeated. Here, eat this if you're low on energy." She handed Danika a piece of candy.

Danika tasted it cautiously, and then ate it happily. It tasted of strawberry cream, or perhaps it only smelled of strawberry cream. She wasn't certain, but she enjoyed it.

Treebane gestured toward the tree she'd been cutting, and said warningly, "It uses a lot more energy than cutting into something properly, but it can reach a bit farther, do as much or more damage, and take your enemy by surprise."

She lifted her axe and said, "So you'll take your claws," her eyes flicked to her axe head and back to Danika, and she continued, "and this skill will let you flick the air with them, as though you were pushing against water instead, as fast as a falcon's dive." The elderly woodcutter flicked the axe forward with seemingly impossible speed and an invisible blade of air hit the tree and knocked a slash into the wood as though the axe itself had hit.

The faint chime of a skill learned pinged in the distance with that single demonstration. "Wow!" Danika exclaimed. It took her a few tries to get the skill to activate, and the small mark her first wind slash left on the tree didn't look likely to slay any slimes soon, but she was happy. It was her first direct damage skill.

Treebane said unusually cheerfully, "Well done, you're a quick learner little ZipZing. I've taught you everything I can now. When you're finished with everything you want to do within the vale, the traveling merchant can activate the portal that will take you out into the Jade Empire to truly start your life as a dragon's child. Luck in your adventures ZipZing."

Danika hovered there for a moment, but it was clear that she'd been dismissed. She nodded and said, "Thank you."

She flew back into the village, intending to visit the innkeeper next, but she noticed the wizard was standing in the village square when she reached it. He looked up and beckoned to her. She approached a little cautiously, and he grinned at her and said, "My familiar told me that you've already fully mastered the light cantrip. Well done! It's very rare to see such a promising novice, are you certain that you wouldn't like to become a wizard yourself?"

Danika rolled her eyes at the wizard and said, a little accusingly, "I knew that cat was yours..." She added a little uncomfortably, "But it's wrong, I still haven't gained my third point in light."

The wizard's eyes crinkled merrily as he gazed at her with that oddly ancient knowing look. "Oh, three grades in its casting is merely a convenient measure of the minimum amount of magical practice needed to use a more complex spell. True mastery of the movement, of the light and its individual particles, is the basis of all illusion," he said as he held out his hand and conjured a tiny dragon upon his palm. Not a fairy dragon with butterfly wings and pixie sparkles like Danika, but a true dragon that flew in a graceful curve around his fingers before vanishing.

Danika gulped. "Can't I learn to do that without choosing to become a wizard?" she asked uncertainly.

"Mmm," the wizard hummed noncommittally. "The traveling merchant did mention that you want to be able to learn everything. That's quite an impressive goal, but you'll have to live longer than a full blooded dragon, or maybe even longer than the gods, to complete it?"

Danika blushed and corrected the wizard, "I don't expect to be able to learn everything, but I'd like to be able to learn anything."

She couldn't see it herself, but the sparkles coming off her wings turned rosy with her blush. The wizard gazed at her for a moment and murmured, "dazzling," before replying simply, "Yes, it's possible for you to learn to cast illusions without taking the path of magic."

Danika smiled with relief, but then he added sternly, "But, you'll have to find someone to teach you the spell, after you've learned all three of the cantrips it requires. Because you won't be able to unlock it naturally, and I can still only offer you one spell."

Danika was tempted, truly tempted, to take the path of magic and easily learn to call the image of a dragon like that. But she really did want to have the ability to learn anything she chose, whether it belonged to someone else's idea of what a wizard, or ranger, or cleric, or anything ought to be able to do, or not.

After a long moment, she shook her head, and said firmly, "Please teach me the spell you used to make the apple lighter." She added, "But tell me which cantrips, because I intend to seek them out and learn that spell someday!"

The elderly elven wizard grinned at her again. He described the cantrips to her carefully, and then added simply, "I hope you learn everything you need to, and much that you want to in your adventures ZipZing." He whispered something else that she didn't quite hear, and the wizard vanished, at the same moment as the faint chime of a skill acquisition rang.

Danika blinked and stared at the empty space where he'd stood for a moment. She hadn't asked him how to level her dazzling skill. She sighed, and then pulled up her character sheet and looked at it. Her new spell was called "Featherweight," and there was another change in her character sheet: colours had been added. All of the cantrips and spells were blue.

She tapped on her dazzling skill, which was white like flight, and a description of the skill popped up: "A natural sparkle that may change colours to indicate emotion. The

intensity normally varies somewhat with surrounding light conditions, but with practice can be purposefully intensified. There is a chance for intensified dazzle to distract or even daze the viewer at high levels."

Danika craned her head around to see the sparkles coming off her wings and tried to sparkle more brightly. There was no obvious change. She thought about how she'd reflected more brightly in the dim light of the cat's eyes.

As if her thought had summoned it, a "mew" was spoken into the empty village square. When Danika turned toward the sound, she saw the wizard's cat sitting in the sun near the fountain.

Danika asked, "I don't suppose you can show me how to dazzle?"

The cat blinked its eyes in the bright sunlight, its fur gleamed, and it looked so smooth and glossy despite its dark shade. Hints of auburn stripes showed in the sunlight, and then Danika blinked. The light faded a little as though a faint cloud cover had settled back into place between the tree branches high above.

The cat yawned and stretched. It flicked an ear at the fountain before walking off.

Danika stared after it for a moment and then laughed and called out, "Thank you!" The cat flicked its tail and then vanished around the next corner.

She darted over to the fountain and splashed off the faint layer of dust that she'd collected in her adventures. Then she stared at her reflection in the fountain's pool, and tried to intensify her sparkle. The faint chime of a skill increase rang in the distance, and the sparkle of her wings seemed to spread across her scales just a little.

Danika called up the menu to check her skills again, and noticed that the quest list icon was glowing. When she tapped it, she received a notification window hovering above the list window. It read, "The Search for Knowledge: 5 Karma Bonus! You've leveled up a skill with the help of a hidden resident of the vale."

Danika grinned and flicked it closed, then flew off to collect her last skill.

## *15: Into the Darkness*

Learning the innkeeper's special skill threatened to give Danika a headache. The slime heart coins of the Jade Empire were actually the simplest of the currencies that the innkeeper showed Danika.

Their value could be roughly calculated by their cylindrical volume or their weight, and they tended to have fairly regular proportions. A level one slime heart was the base unit known simply as a coin. But a level two slime heart was worth approximately 8 coins, and a level 3 worth approximately 26 coins. Theoretically a standard weight level 100 slime's heart would be worth roughly 982 thousand coins.

The shells of the sea folk were worse, they were valued by a baffling combination of size, color, sheen, shape and condition.

The ingot currency of the dwarves seemed easier to understand than the slime hearts, until they got into the alloys.

The innkeeper showed her several other even more obscure and thankfully rarely seen currencies. Then she helpfully recommended that Danika spend or exchange the rarer currencies with the traveling merchant, who always gave a fair value, if she ever acquired them.

When Danika finally learned the skill, she felt like a child who'd been required to learn to do addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, and then handed a calculator... She wanted to cry and ask why the innkeeper couldn't have magically transferred her skill to Danika the way the wizard had.

"The Search for Knowledge" was complete and her Karma points increased again. Danika had intended to leave the vale before stopping for the night, but she felt very tired out by all the math and types of currency. She logged out.

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Despite the late hour, Danika decided to watch an episode of a light hearted series that she enjoyed when she needed a break. The simplistic plot felt like pure relaxation after her game session. Her dreams afterward repeated fragments of the episode displayed in the Sandman's three dimensional golden sands.

When she woke up, she wondered if you could request current episodes of things in your dreams in "Living Jade Empire". So far she hadn't fallen asleep again while connected to the game.

Her day passed normally apart from the grey curtains of rain that drizzled intermittently outside her window. She felt completely subdued when she logged in to the game and discovered that it was raining in the beginner's vale as well.

The traveling merchant was, very conveniently, waiting for her in the village square. He was twirling the stem of a colorful umbrella in his hands. He called out, "ZipZing, how wonderful to see you again. Have you accomplished everything you want to here?"

Danika nodded.

The merchant winked at her and asked, "Don't like rain?"

"Not really," she admitted.

"Look up," he suggested.

Danika looked up, expecting to see more grey clouds, and saw a thousand rainbows instead. She gasped, and the merchant chuckled. High above, the flowers in the tree that glowed at night were glowing already. As the rain misted down each one cast a rainbow halo around itself.

He waited silently while she gazed upward for awhile. Finally he spoke again, "You're soaking wet you know. Can I sell you anything to aid you in your adventures before you leave the vale? An umbrella perhaps? No, I think you'd be cuter with an eternal leaf. I think I have a few small ones."

Danika surveyed the contents of her inventory while asking, "An eternal leaf?" She had the salt bag with the 3rd level coin worth about 26 coins and the remainder of the spool of thread, the slime skin, and the wizard's yellow apple left.

The merchant explained, "An eternal leaf is a leaf that remains alive through a type of stasis enchantment."

Danika told him, "I think maybe I ought to get more food instead, can you suggest anything particularly small and dense?"

He winked at her and suggested, "How about normal food in a pouch of holding?"

Danika blinked and asked doubtfully, "How expensive would that be? And would I be able to store such a thing within my storage ring?"

"Certainly, and quite expensive for a novice I suppose," he answered her questions in reverse order. "About 200 coins for the pouch, and perhaps another 12 to fill it with food."

"I have 26 coins worth, and I'm out of slimes to hunt," Danika responded dryly.

The merchant grinned at her and asked questioningly, "Oh, did you harvest them all and spend the loot on something else?"

"All?" Danika repeated.

"There is usually an entire flock in residence here in the vale. I saw the one that you wounded with something pointy just the other evening," he informed her with amusement.

"But the quest said to defeat THE slime at the bottom of the vale," Danika protested a bit querulously.

The merchant spread his hands in a helpless gesture and explained, "There's not really room for more than one to come out at a time there, and the great tree shades the upper slopes too much for them. Each one only spends a few bells a day out in the open anyway."

Danika thought hard about just ignoring the information and leaving the vale with what she was currently carrying. She was in more of a mood to explore new places than to fight. But in the end, she decided to spend the rest of the damp, but rainbowclad day, hunting slimes to gain more inventory space.

The merchant made it a little easier by offering to buy the raw slime skins for 5 coins each, as long as they weren't damaged too much. Danika sold him the skin from her ring storage and bought rock salt and cheese with the proceeds.

Danika struggled to cram the apple into the old salt sack with the rest so that everything would fit into her inventory, and realized that she really did need to buy that pouch. In the end she cast featherweight on the new salt sack and flew as fast as possible with it clutched in her claws.

The weeds she'd planted before were still struggling to grow along the rocks but enough patches had developed that a slime was able to squeeze out into the usual sunning spot. It didn't stay long, it seemed to be checking to see if there was any sun. It, or another, appeared again a couple of minutes later.

Danka devised a new battle tactic: she used her new wind slash to cut a little hole into the slime, threw a chunk of rock salt into the hole, and used more slashes to push the salt into the center of the slime. The first time she got lucky with her throw, but in the following battles if she missed with the salt, she just threw another piece as quickly as she could. She was a little afraid of getting sucked in again if she got too close.

Danika used up the last of the cheese she'd gotten to replenish her energy right before the 8th battle. To her surprise, her wind slash leveled up on her third strike during that last battle. Her flight skill still hadn't leveled, and she flew practically all the time.

It took 8 slimes to gain enough coin, because two of them were level 2 instead of 3. She was pretty sure that one of the slimes she defeated was the one she'd stabbed with the sharp stick. It had a scar at about the right place, and the merchant gave her a reduced price for that skin.

Danika made her purchases and sorted her inventory: she had a new pouch with 10 inventory slots full of bread, cheese, candy made from berries and nuts, and the apple. The old salt sack held the partial spool of thread and a few leftover coins. The new salt sack held just 3 more pieces of rock salt, and could be discarded if needed.

When she was finished she followed the traveling merchant through the stone gap and up to the standing ring. Before he opened it, he turned back to her and said, "Although you've never asked, I think this will aid you in the future." He reached out and tapped her nose lightly, and the soft distant chime of a skill acquired rang out once more.

Danika felt like an idiot for never asking what skills the merchant could teach, and she realized belatedly that he hadn't come up on her "Search for Knowledge" because he wasn't technically a resident of the village or the vale. Her wings sparkled like a small embarrassed firework as she mumbled, "Thank you," and wondered what she'd just learned.

The merchant opened the portal for her on the darkest night Danika had yet seen in the vale. The clouds still lingered, and the flowers shown dimly as though they were low on energy. And as she readied herself to set off into the world of "Living Jade Empire" her

character sheet read:

--

ZipZing, a Fairy Dragon and a Novice.

Karma: 26

Reincarnations: 0

Accumulated Level: 20

--

Skills:

Flight, natural: 1

Breath, exhaust: 2

Dazzling: 1

Light, cantrip: 2

Featherweight, spell: 1

Plant Growth, spell: 1

Restore, prayer: 1

Binding String: 1

Wind Slash, attack: 2

Stealth: 1

Evasion: 1

Identify Animal: 1

Identify Plant: 1

Appraisal, currency: 1

Assimilation: 2

Impartation: 1

--

The traveling merchant said gently, "Enjoy your first adventures as a dragon's child, until we meet again ZipZing."

Danika took a deep breath, glanced back at the faded flowers growing high above, and then stepped through the portal into darkness. Literal darkness. There was absolutely nothing visible. She spun, and there was more nothing behind her. She spoke, and her voice didn't come out.



## *16: True Beginning*

For a moment, Danika panicked, more scared than when she'd been drowning in the slime. But after a few minutes in the silent empty darkness, she took another deep breath and assumed the pose. Her menu screens popped into existence normally, and she could see them without difficulty. She flicked over to the help section, did a brief search on the server status, and then filed a bug report.

She waited in the darkness. A bit of time passed before she heard humming sounds that resolved into voices that still carried an odd high pitched hum beneath their words as they grew closer and less muffled.

"Just look at it, it's twice the size of the others," a worried voice said.

Someone else hummed in reply.

"I don't think it's safe to keep it here," continued the first voice.

Another voice replied, "It sparkles just like the others though, maybe it's just special?"

A third voice, possibly the hummer, declared, "Let's ask the pod elders."

Danika listened intently, but nothing else was said; the humming voiced people seemed to have departed. She watched her bug report for any reply while she waited. After a while, she logged out, and disconnected herself from the VR-medi pod.

She pulled herself over the edge, and wondered what she should do with her evening. After a few minutes she loaded the game on her phone, to see if she was trapped in darkness through that interface as well.

It was the same, all her menus showed, but there was nothing but a black screen beyond them. She opened her bug report and added that the problem existed in the mobile interface as well. A moment later she received a reply.

It read: "From the honorable celestial servant of the seventh class, Lin Hao, first among his rank, serving the Jade Emperor in the maintenance of the Living Jade Empire: Working on it."

Danika hesitated a moment, and then replied: "Thanks."

She had water boiling before she received another reply: "From the honorable celestial servant of the seventh class, Lin Hao, first among his rank, serving the Jade Emperor in the maintenance of the Living Jade Empire: np."

Danika read the common abbreviation of "no problem" and laughed at the contrast between the lengths of title and the content. She decided to leave the game open, and browsed job possibilities for the following morning on her other screen.

She was startled when her phone started emitting music of some high pitched woodwind variety. A dialog popped up explaining, "You hear a faint lullaby." She rolled her eyes and turned down the volume until it actually was faint.

Danika found a leveling job available that she snatched up with amusement. Someone was paying quite a bit to have one of the old alt accounts that she'd sold max leveled. They were probably going to submit it to "Living Jade Empire" since they had no other stipulations. Since she was quite familiar with both the game and the account, it would be easy, though time consuming work.

She went ahead and started on it while she waited for "Living Jade Empire" tech support to resolve whatever had gone wrong. After she'd been leveling for awhile, she noticed that a dialog had popped up on her phone. She scrolled back up a little and caught up:

"You hear a humming beneath the lullaby."

Voice: "Shh, try to move it quietly."

Voice B: "I thought they decided to keep it for now."

Voice: "They don't know what it is either, and the safety of the rest is my responsibility."

Voice B: "What are you going to tell them when they ask where it is later? That it flew away?"

Voice: "They're so old they've probably already forgotten I told them about it. Anyway, it's not like we're destroying it, we're just moving it."

Voice C: "That's one way of putting it."

The dialog ended. Danika considered it while she leveled her old character, leaving her phone propped up against the screen in front of her.

Something was being stolen, she decided. Something that sparkled... and was large enough to make moving it silently difficult. And it was potentially dangerous. After thinking for awhile, she decided that she didn't have either enough clues or enough context.

Awhile later another message arrived from the honorable Lin Hao. It was much longer than the previous ones, and Danika paused the older game and read it hopefully: "From the honorable celestial servant of the seventh class, Lin Hao, first among his rank, serving the Jade Emperor in the maintenance of the Living Jade Empire: I think I've created a better visual representation of what it should be like inside your egg. I've changed the display for all future eggs as well. It wasn't really a bug, but I can easily understand your confusion. You're actually the first person to hatch in the Living Jade Empire! I have granted you a token. Congratulations, and good luck in your hatching! P.S. If you're still playing through the mobile interface you'll need to restart the game."

Danika stared blankly at the message. Her egg. Suddenly she remembered the warning from "The First Dwarven Smith" about literally starting life as a child. She quickly restarted the game.

A curved wall appeared in front of her, no matter how she spun, it was the same, except for the lighting. Below it was darker, and in one area it was lighter and sort of glowed softly like something was shining behind it.

She tapped her inventory ring, which displayed in one corner from the phone. A message popped up: "Storage cannot be accessed at this time." She frowned at it. She hadn't tried accessing it when everything had been dark, so she didn't know if it had been inaccessible since she left the beginner's vale or not.

Danika sat and gazed at the inside of her own eggshell for a bit. Nothing detectable seemed to be happening, so she placed it against her other screen edge again, and resumed leveling the old account until it reached a good quitting spot.

In some much older games it had actually been pretty common for dragon hatchlings to have a few levels, and skills learned while still in the egg, but Danika wondered if she'd still have her storage ring when she hatched. It would suck to have spent so much time killing slimes to expand her inventory only to have it vanish.

When Danika finished the old game's current quest, she heaved herself back into the VR-medi pod and hooked up the interface. She knew that she ought to sleep instead of playing more, but she was too curious.

Her egg was more detailed seen this way. It was actually very slightly translucent. Danika could see shadows move across it now and then. She tried scratching it, but other than a faint noise, her claw didn't seem to have any effect. Apparently her eggshell was quite sturdy. She wondered if she ought to use her wind slash to try to hatch herself, or if she was supposed to wait.

A large shadow darkened her whole egg suddenly, and a new voice asked doubtfully, "What kind of egg is it? It looks like it's just a small chicken egg covered in pixie dust."

One of the sort of humming voices from before replied quickly, "It's perfectly clean, I assure you. We don't know what kind of egg it is, that's why we thought it would interest you. If you don't want it, I'm sure we can sell it to an enchanter or a rare animal collector."

Danika's egg was lifted and she was bounced around inside it. It was her! She was what had been stolen!

## *17: Pixie Songs and Elven Mead*

With the realization that her egg was being illicitly sold, Danika suddenly understood that it wasn't that the item had been so large, but that the oddly humming voices must belong to pixies.

"Hey! Be careful with it!" protested one of the pixie voices.

Her egg stilled, and the first voice said, "I'm just examining it, I'm not going to buy it if the sparkle just rubs off you know."

A pixie voice replied, "It won't rub off, it's not pixie dust!"

Danika was puzzled. She was supposed to be half pixie, half dragon, shouldn't the pixies know about her? One of them should be her parent, right?

The other voice asked the important question, "Where did you get it then?"

Danika listened intently for the reply. "Someone or something snuck it into our nest," explained one of the humming pixie voices.

The other voice asked with skeptical amusement, "Someone snuck into a pixie nest? One of the nests rumored to be better guarded than a dragon's treasure?"

Danika had no way to communicate to the voice, her suddenly formed theory, that the Jade Emperor was the one who'd put her egg into the pixie nest.

One of the pixie voices grumbled, "It was that dragon's fault, who goes around setting places on fire just because they don't like a little morning song I ask you?"

The other voice chuckled and said, "I see, so your nest burned and when you'd moved in to the new one, this egg was among yours? How careless." Danika's egg spun making her feel a little dizzy, and the voice continued over the high pitched humming laced protests of the pixies, "What if it's just a mimic egg?"

"If it was a mimic egg, it would look exactly like a pixie egg," snapped one of the pixie voices.

"Hmm, is that so?" the other voice asked. It was an oddly neutral voice, and Danika couldn't guess the speaker's gender with any certainty.

There was a subdued humming that made Danika think the pixies were whispering to each other.

The voices bartered with each other for some time. Danika's egg was still, and the bottom of it was warm. She struggled to stay awake, but wasn't too surprised when the world dissolved into golden sparkles before a conclusion was reached.

The Sandman greeted her with a silent flourish, and then a silent sand film played out. A group of pixies created a nest near a dragon's cave. The dragon chased the pixies for awhile. A tiny pixie played tag with the large dragon. The dragon moved to a different cave.

The pixies battled with an invading force of goblins who were harvesting trees at an impressive rate. A number of pixies and goblins died. The pixies moved their nest into a small tree close to the dragon's new cave, and the goblins didn't dare approach. The dragon returned to its old cave.

For awhile the pixies stayed where they were, with the dragon between the two territories. A nest full of pixie eggs hatched in turn, all except for one in a corner. That egg didn't hatch, it just kept growing. The pixies eventually grew too numerous for the small tree, and migrated to a larger tree closer to the dragon's cave.

The dragon burned the large tree slowly from the top down, giving the pixies plenty of time to flee. The pixies claimed a tree growing on an outcrop in the middle of a small lake. When the eggs were placed into their new nest, the overly large egg that hadn't hatched was finally noticed. Three pixies carried the egg away from the new tree.

Danika slept.

When she woke up, it was midday in the real world. She wondered how much of her sparkling sand dreams had been a true account of events in "Living Jade Empire" and how much had been mixed dreams of her own subconscious piecing together clues.

After Danika finished her morning routine it was already mid afternoon. She wanted to rush back into "Living Jade Empire", but a couple of days would already have passed in the game while she slept. Since whatever had happened with the sale of her egg had already happened, she decided that she'd better work on the job she had taken instead.

After working her way through a series of complicated quest chains in the older game, Danika entered a phase of monotonous grinding, and opened "Living Jade Empire" on her phone again. It really was convenient being able to access the game through multiple interfaces.

Only one thing seemed to have changed for ZipZing, she had a new an ongoing quest, although it was possible that she just hadn't noticed it the night before. "Survive until Hatching" had a timer counting down with 34 hours remaining. She was still stuck in her egg. From the mobile interface she couldn't be sure if her egg was moving, but she suspected that it was, as patterns of light and shadow moved gently across it.

Danika propped her phone up and glanced at it frequently, hoping new dialog would pop up and inform her what her current situation was. After awhile her vigilance was rewarded.

Voice: "Oh hey, you're finally connected. Can you make time to identify this enchanted egg I traded that elven mead for?"

Voice: "Are you there? Hello?"

Voice B: "Please tell me you didn't trade twenty-thousand coin worth of elven mead for an unidentified egg?"

Voice: "Um... it seemed like a good idea at the time?"

Voice B: "Fine, whatever, it was your share. Sure, if you can meet me in Elmdale in about half an hour."

Voice: "You're still in elven territory? I'm just outside the human capital."

Voice B: "How, nevermind, tell me later. Ok, I'll portal over. Meet me at Briar's."

Voice: "Alright, thanks!"

The dialog ended, but the changing light and shadow across her eggshell seemed to speed up. Danika hurried to a good save point on the older game and then shut it down. She was across the room and into the VR-medi pod in record time.

Her egg felt a bit chilly and jostled and swayed to the rhythm of hurried footsteps. She had no way to communicate with her purchaser, even though she really wanted to ask about the enchanted description given to her egg, so she pulled up her menu screens while she waited. When she flicked over to her character sheet, there was a new 0 point skill in her list: Strong Luck.

When Danika brought up the description it said simply: "Activates randomly." She wondered if it was the token the honorable Lin Hao had mentioned. A zero point luck skill didn't seem very useful.

Briar's turned out to be some sort of cafe or bar, from the background clinks and conversations when ZipZing's purchaser arrived. The man they were meeting arrived a few minutes later.

Danika clung to her shell with her claws as she was swung out for display and her egg landed with a bit of a thump on a much warmer surface than wherever she'd been riding. Since her egg was then turned about and rolled over, she guessed that it had been the man's hand that she'd been placed on.

He said, "It is quite pretty at least, very sparkly."

The neutral voiced person asked, "Can you tell what it is?"

There was a fairly long silence, while the background noises of the establishment were all that could be heard. Danika thought that her purchaser was being surprisingly patient. She herself was practically bouncing with impatience.

Finally the man said, "It keeps failing. It says, oh, I see... it's a living creature. I can only identify objects. We need Terri for animal identification?"

Her purchaser replied, "Oh... right." A pause and then, "She's logged in, but not replying."

A woman's voice asked dryly, "Why would I send a reply when I'm already here?"

## *18: An Adventurer's Egg*

The man asked, "Why are you here? Did both of you rush back to human territory without me?"

Terri laughed, and asked teasingly, "Poor Justin, did you feel abandoned?" She explained, "I've been taking exams since we did that quest, and when I finished my last one, I had eight messages from Quin talking about some sparkly egg. The latest one said that he was meeting you here, so I paid for a portal trip as soon as I logged in."

Danika blinked in surprise, these people spoke easily of things like logging on and exams. This wasn't a scenario scripted by "Living Jade Empire", these were players.

Her purchaser, Quin, hurriedly protested, "I didn't rush back without you, I took a griffin tour over the dragon range between elven and human territory, and we were shot at by goblin catapults. My guide evaded them, but mine was shot down."

"Oooh, did you get any cool screenshots?" Terri asked enthusiastically.

"About two hundred of the dragon range, I was hoping I might spot some lairs," Quin replied wistfully.

"I meant of getting shot down by goblins," Terri complained. "And if you're going to take that many pictures, you might as well upgrade to video."

"No way I'm giving 200 Karma to the Gods of Memory just to get video," Quin said dryly, "what if I died?"

"If you want to go hunting dragons, you're definitely going to die," Justin said sourly.

Quin said, "I wasn't thinking we could take a dragon yet, but maybe I could steal a discarded scale while one was out. I only need one to get that enchantment laid on my gloves, but they cost ¼ million on the market."

Danika looked at her skin and wondered if she ever discarded scales. She didn't see any lying on the bottom of her egg, and the tiny scales of her skin seemed smooth and glossy. She'd bet that the chickens had gotten some off her tail during her evasion training though.

"Anyway," Quin pulled the topic back, "can you identify this egg please Terri? And then can you check what kind of curse or enchantment is on it Justin?"

"I can try," Terri agreed. "Did you steal it from the goblins?" Danika's egg changed hands much more gently than it had during the first transfer. Presumably Terri held her now.

"No," Quin told her wryly, "I managed to sneak away from them, but ran into some pixies. I thought I was going to die, but it wasn't a whole pixie pod, just a few stragglers who wanted to trade for supplies for their nest."

"He traded all the elven mead for it," Justin said dryly.

"It was taking up a lot of inventory space anyway," Quin replied defensively. "And the egg isn't just sparkly, there's at least one enchantment on it. Or maybe it's cursed, since I can't put it into my inventory. I haven't dared log out since getting it."

"I don't think it's cursed," Justin said in a puzzled tone, "if that's the only effect you've noticed. Even if you can't put it away, you are able to hand it over to us easily enough. When Terri is done I'll go ahead and spend the materials to examine the spell, if you want. I was assuming that it was probably just an active illusion enchantment to make an ordinary egg magically sparkle and sucker you into buying it."

"Hey," Quin protested.

Justin laughed and added, "I'm pretty curious now though."

Danika was even more curious about why none of them seemed to be able to identify her as another player. Surely at least one of them had looked at her through their menu lens by now. Maybe the eggshell blocked the view both ways?

"You're so lucky to have a tank with some ranger skills and a wizard with some enchanter skills in your party Quin," Terri said teasingly. "But I'm not sure about what this egg is, my identification skill only says that it's half pixie."

"Hey, why does that make you look so excited?" Quin asked suspiciously.

Justin spoke with repressed excitement, "Last time Terri couldn't identify a species fully, it was that disguised elf."

"So?" Quin and Terri asked in unison.

"Elves are half dragons," Justin said smugly.

"And?" prompted Quin.

"And I haven't bonded a familiar yet!" Justin exclaimed as though it were obvious. There was a moment of silence and then he explained, "fairy dragons are familiars of legend. Familiars don't just boost your casting level, you can borrow their skills."

"Even assuming that the half I can't identify is dragon, what skills would it have that are so amazing? And why would it be called a fairy dragon instead of a pixie dragon?" Terri questioned.

"I don't know why most pixie halves are called fairies, but fairy dragons are illusionists," Justin said smugly. "It would be like gaining a second specialty."

Danika wanted to protest that she wasn't an illusionist... but wondered if that was why she was able to see and move the particles of her light cantrip.

"I bet a fairy dragon would make a really cute pet," Terri said speculatively. "I could try taming it, if you fail to bond it."

"It's my egg," Quin said possessively.

"I know," Justin agreed.



"It's all speculation anyway. Examine the enchantment it's under first?" Terri suggested.

This was apparently an involved process, as not only did Danika change hands again, but the whole group traveled to somewhere else, where they rented a room. "Why are we renting space here? I thought you'd paid for your tower's private portal?" Quin asked.

Justin replied a little grimly, "Oh I did, but I'm scheduled out three more weeks for the installation. Not enough people want to play enchanters, because even though it's a magic path, it's basically a crafting job. And there are apparently only a handful of NPC enchanters of high enough level to do portal work in the whole game."

"Wow, maybe you chose the wrong specialty? Sounds like you'd have made a killing if you'd focused on enchanting?" Terri questioned.

Quin replied first, "But what would we do without our main damage dealer?"

"Hey, are you looking down on my DPS?" Terri questioned with mock anger, and then added more practically, "He could probably have built us some pretty nice equipment to boost our damage and effects by now."

Justin spoke with exasperation, "If I'd chosen to be an enchanter, I'd be too expensive for you guys to support. All the successful ones so far work with the big guilds, because of all the different materials enchanting requires."

"Speaking of which, thanks for using up all this stuff on examining the enchantment," Quin added unsubtly, "on my egg."

Justin laughed.

## ***19: Answers Provoke Questions***

Danika's egg was transferred again, and then seemingly floated in something cold, that made her shiver and worry about her ongoing quest to survive until hatching. Fortunately before it got too bad she was placed somewhere warm again, unfortunately, her egg was then spun like a top.

Quin commented worriedly, "It's wobbling a lot, and the sparkles have turned such a sickly green... I don't think it likes this."

Justin replied a bit sarcastically, "You're worried about its feelings now? But you were carrying it so very considerably, tossed over your shoulder in the basket of your rapier hilt?"

"Well, it might be something dangerous, you know, that suddenly hatches and devours the closest source of protein... or something," Quin said defensively.

Danika shuddered and wondered if she'd underestimated the difficulty of surviving until she hatched.

"Poor thing," Terri murmured.

When the test finally ended, Danika laid limply at the bottom of her egg and Justin said, "How odd."

Danika wanted to tell him sarcastically, "No this is perfectly normal," but she still couldn't speak aloud.

Justin continued, "The only enchantment on the egg seems to be a space type, like a pouch of holding."

"So something very large might hatch out of it?" Quin asked.

Danika hoped that it was her storage ring being detected. If her item was detectable, it increased the chances that it would function after she finally hatched. She looked around her egg and thought about how she'd seemed just a bit smaller than the wizard's cat though. They'd said she could have been inside a chicken's egg, so maybe it was just that the egg was bigger on the inside.

"Maybe?" Justin complained, "There aren't any other spells on it though, so there shouldn't be anything preventing us from placing it into our inventories."

"What if Quin is right and it's going to hatch into something really big? Something too big to fit in your inventory space?" Terri suggested.

There was a contemplative silence.

Quin was the first one to reject the notion, saying, "But I have enough room in my inventory for 12 barrels of mead plus some. How big can anything that's half pixie be?"

Terri said dryly, "Well, maybe Justin is right and it'll be half dragon? That's the biggest thing I can think of right now."

"A whale would be bigger I think?" Justin chimed in.

"Do you think a fairy dragon would be big enough to ride?" Quin asked curiously.

Danika snorted.

"No idea," Terri replied. "But a pixie is about 1/20th the size of a human, so it might only be about 4 feet long when it grows up."

"Half breeds in this game don't work that neatly," Justin interrupted. "They usually just have shared characteristics, and are matched to a mythical monster. Like griffons are half bird and half cat, and the result is bigger than both of those added together."

"I guess that's true," Terri agreed, "and the dragon halves are even weirder, since elves and dwarves don't even look anything like dragons, they just have pointed ears, innate magic, and long lifespans."

The three continued to argue the possibilities, but Danika logged out. The enchantment test had been her worst VR-medi pod experience so far. It made her wonder why there weren't VR roller coasters, but when she looked it up, there were already half a dozen theme park games being developed for the system.

She ate a late supper, and then played on the old account that she was leveling up. It lacked a lot compared to "Living Jade Empire", but it never spun you like a centrifuge. For once Danika could kind of understand the people who claimed that even if they could afford VR, they preferred less immersive interfaces.

Danika logged back in on her phone after a bit, to check on her egg. Her egg seemed to be somewhere still and quiet now. She decided, after a while, that the three adventurers had stored her somewhere and logged off for the night.

--

After completing her morning routine, Danika resumed leveling the old account while monitoring her egg on her phone. She was glad that she'd logged on when she realized that her "Survive until Hatching" counter hadn't counted down at all while she'd been offline, it still said 30 hours remaining.

Since she was definitely sitting as still as possible most of the time, she occasionally had ZipZing waste energy by throwing out a spell or a skill.

Binding, identify and appraisal wouldn't work since she had no targets for them, and she was afraid to try her wind slash in case she hatched too early and failed to survive. The impartation skill that the traveling merchant had gifted her also seemed to be a targeted skill, although she wasn't entirely sure what sort of target it ought to have until she read the skill description and discovered that it was a skill used to teach a skill to someone else.

She found it amusing that both stealth and evasion would let her trigger them, but had no effect that she could discern. Maybe she was hiding in her egg.

Danika settled into a routine where she alternated between dazzling, light, and featherweight, since she could see some effect from those three. Dazzling was ridiculously

easy to trigger through the phone interface, it was just a few button taps. Casting featherweight on herself made her float in the center of her egg. She could only cast her light within the confines of her shell, but her practice was rewarded a couple of hours later when her light gained a skill level.

She couldn't figure out how to move the light particles individually through the phone interface, at first. Eventually she discovered that if she zoomed her view in far enough, she could see each particle and a little control ring around each. Even at the highest magnification it was very difficult to move a particle without touching the selection rings of the others. After playing with it a little she decided that it was taking too much of her focus and just cast it normally.

Her hatching timer had counted down to 28 hours left when a dialog popped up suddenly.

Justin: "Hmm, now how did you move over there little egg?"

Danika echoed his question, her egg had moved?

## *20: How to Survive until Hatching*

The movement of her egg wasn't explained, instead the dialog continued with, "You hear rustling noises," and then suddenly her egg went dark.

Justin: "Ha! I thought that might work."

There was nothing else for awhile. Her egg stayed dark, and Justin didn't speak again. Danika felt incredibly frustrated by her inability to communicate. She couldn't even message...

Danika halted mid thought, and assumed the pose. Her menus flashed up, and she flicked over to the friend list and tapped on add. She put in a standard spelling for Justin, and submitted the search. It defaulted to sorting by proximity, and the closest Justin was Justin the Grey. She sent a request, and it was instantly rejected. To be rejected so quickly, she thought he must have it set to auto reject.

Danika flung a short stream of silenced curses at the frustrating wizard. Almost as an afterthought, she tried Terri and Quin. None of the spellings she could think of for those returned a result in close proximity, but they could be offline or somewhere else. There was nothing else she could think of to try, and her egg remained in a quiet dark place, so Danika resumed her skill practice.

--

She kept an eye on her phone screen as she worked on the old account. She was currently repeating an unpopular quest in the old game that had always given quite a lot of experience, but had cost the character quite a bit of gold to complete without providing any other reward.

If she'd been submitting the account to "Living Jade Empire" herself, she might have avoided the quest, since wealth was counted as well as level, but the job only specified level and asked that it be completed as quickly as possible.

Justin didn't helpfully monologue when his friends weren't around to talk to. Light returned to her eggshell a couple of hours later, with accompanying rustling noises. The only other dialogue that popped up that evening was when Quin called Justin:

Justin: "Yes?"

Quin: "Hey, I'm really busy and can't play tonight, can you put another 4 game days on the egg's room for me?"

Justin: "No..."

Quin: "Seriously?"

Justin: "It's here at my tower, but don't blame me if it hatches when you aren't online."

Quin: "You're stealing my egg!"

Justin: "Seriously?"

Quin: "Well, you didn't message me that you've already taken it? Also, Terri messaged me and said that I should be keeping it warm."

Quin: "Hello? Are you still there?"

A brighter light shown upon the surface of Danika's eggshell before Justin replied: "No, the egg thief has gone offline."

The dialog ended there. The light was golden and sort of flickered now and then.

When Danika finished up for the night, she was pretty satisfied with her progress on the old account. It should reach max level with one more long game session. Four days to max level might not be within record time, but it was not a small accomplishment either.

Since her egg was apparently sitting safely in Justin's tower, she didn't log in through the VR-medi pod that night. Instead she tried out some episodes of newly released shows with the game still open on her phone so that her hatching timer would continue to count down. Surviving until her hatching seemed to be relatively simple and monotonous for the most part.

--

The next morning Danika woke to an alarm and realized that she'd forgotten it was laundry day. She didn't want to pay the extra charges that special pick up times and services incurred, so she struggled to get everything gathered, and loaded into her basket. She showed up on the curb in her pajamas, which made the driver laugh, but she felt grateful that he had waited there while she reached the loading zone.

The day was temperate and bright. If she hadn't been in her pajamas, she might have gone down to the park a few blocks away for awhile, instead she returned to her room and resumed her normal routine. When she got herself settled in front of the older game with her phone propped up on her egg screen, her remaining time until she hatched was 16 hours.

--

Danika stretched and looked at the last "Level up!" notification with satisfaction. She logged out of her old account for the last time, then submitted her invoice through the job site she'd used. Hopefully it would be paid in a timely fashion.

She gazed out her window for a little bit, before glancing back at her phone. The afternoon looked warm with little fluffy clouds high in the sky, and the inside of her eggshell looked boring.

There hadn't been any conversations to eavesdrop on, and the only detectable changes had been in the shades of light. ZipZing had leveled up again in all three of the skills that she was slowly practicing, but that was it. Danika was seriously tempted to complain that the hatching timer was too long, but figured that she'd wait until she discovered what the reward for completing it was.

In the meantime, she decided that the cost of some mobile data and the effort of dragging herself back outside would be worth some sunshine and fresh air. The day

rewarded her by keeping its good face for the entirety of her outing.

Danika didn't do anything that would have been considered exciting by most people's standards. She ordered a bubble tea from a local shop, and then went around the local park's paved paths. She stopped again for ice cream on her way home, and that was it.

Even if most people wouldn't have found her outing at all strenuous, Danika was quite tired by the time she settled back onto her own familiar floor. She wrinkled her nose at herself and acknowledged that she ought to increase her daily exercises. She checked her quest timer, and there were still six hours to go until she hatched.

Danika returned to "Living Jade Empire" through the VR-medi pod interface before sleeping. Her egg was pleasantly warm, and Danika searched it carefully for any other changes that hadn't shown from her phone, but there didn't seem to be any. She went over her skill list and realized belatedly that she ought to have tried practicing her breath skill as well.

She huffed a breath experimentally, and was a little shocked when the skill level chime rang in the distance and the Sandman popped up. He laughed and said, "Welcome back. We don't get many who put themselves to sleep here."

Danika replied worriedly, "Will I be logged out before my hatching timer runs down if I really fall asleep here?"

The Sandman answered cheerfully, "Your inactivity timer is currently set to half an hour."

Danika relaxed a little and asked, "Can I watch current episodes of shows in my dreams here?"

He replied with an expression of confusion, "I don't understand. Please describe the subject you wish to dream about?"

She sighed and guessed that it had been hoping for too much. A moment later another thought occurred to her. "Can I dream about what the adventurer who purchased my egg did since leaving me in the rented room?" she asked.

The Sandman shook his head and winked at her before replying, "You can replay highlights from your own adventures, but not those of other players."

Danika's eyes lit up and she asked, "Can I see what's been happening to my egg from the outside?"

There was a brief pause while her request traveled through various levels of processing behind the facade of the God of Dreams, and then he replied, "Indeed you can. Sleep well my dear."

## *21: A Dragon Hatches*

Danika watched highlights of her adventures drawn in sparkling golden sands, from the outside perspective, with interest. She saw the appearances of Quin, Justin and Terri for the first time.

Quin seemed to be an elven rogue of some sort, and watching her egg bounce along tucked into the cupped hilt of his rapier would have been nerve wracking if she hadn't known that she'd already survived it. She listened to his strangely neutral voice again and wondered briefly if he were playing his natural gender.

Terri seemed to be human, but she was quite tall. Taller than the characters of both men, and strikingly beautiful, she looked like some sort of Valkyrie in her shining armor. Danika would bet heavily on Terri's player being a small plain schoolgirl who'd paid Karma at character creation on appearance modifiers.

Justin looked like such an ordinary young man, despite his exotic (and likely expensive) wizard's robes, that Danika expected he looked pretty much the same in real life. "Living Jade Empire", like many current first person games, used data from your health apps and photos of you to generate your original avatar. It wasn't expensive to modify it though, so most people did.

Danika wasn't certain exactly when she fell into real sleep. She'd watched Justin place her into an ordinary sack, the way she used her old salt sack, and tie it to his belt before hiking overland to the small village where he had a tower. He must have been playing since the beta to have built up enough resources to own such a structure, even if it was in a remote village.

He'd placed her egg into a goblet and summoned a small fire elemental into a matching goblet, to make the warm light that had been shining on her egg the past few days in game time, and then left. A few times he'd returned and stored things in the shelves of the room he was keeping her in, and then left again.

--

Danika added a few extra minutes to her exercises the next morning. She planned to play all day, so she cooked a breakfast instead of eating her usual quick cold foods.

When she finally returned to the game, her "Survive until Hatching" quest had about 2 hours left on the timer. She sighed, and leaned against the wall of her egg. Her egg started to roll.

It rolled completely over before Danika panicked and realized that she must no longer be sitting safely in the wizard's goblet. She skittered across the bottom of her egg in the opposite direction of its movement, and her egg halted, and then started to roll the other way.

She felt like a hamster in a ball, only she couldn't see where she was going. She couldn't get her egg to balance again, every time she thought she had it, some slight movement would set it off again. The worst part was that she didn't even know if she was in danger, or if her attempts to stabilize her egg were endangering it more.



After what seemed like an hour, but was probably only a few minutes, Justin snatched up her egg, and said earnestly, "Woah there, no, no. Please don't hatch yet. I'm not quite ready."

He set her down again somewhere that her egg didn't roll, and slightly frantic clattering sounds followed. Danika laid against the bottom of her egg and heaved a long sigh. When she had her breath back she pulled up the timer and saw with disgust that it still had 1 ¾ hours left.

A few minutes later the loud bang of a door sounded, and Quin asked breathlessly, "Am I too late? I logged in as fast as I could."

Justin replied tightly, "You tell me, I can't look at it, have to finish grinding this."

Danika's egg darkened as Quin leaned over it. After a moment he said doubtfully, "I don't see any cracks and it's not moving?"

"Good," Justin muttered.

"Are you sure it's going to hatch now?" Quin questioned.

"No," Justin admitted. "But I had put it in the middle of the magic circle, and stepped out to get the fresh leaves, and when I got back it was rocking back and forth and messing up the lines."

Quin asked curiously, "How are you supposed to get the usual cat or whatever to sit still while you draw all those lines?"

"I suppose it's probably easier if it's willing or asleep," Justin answered dryly.

--

When whatever it was that was being prepared was finished, Justin and Quin chatted idly. Terri showed up after awhile and the discussion got more lively, and more random.

They all waited impatiently for the egg to hatch. After about an hour Justin told the egg sourly, "I know I asked you not to hatch yet earlier, but you can go ahead and hatch anytime now."

Danika flipped him off from the privacy of her egg. She was just as impatient as the three adventurers as she watched the last half hour tick by on the quest timer. When the last second finally passed, a lot of things suddenly happened almost all at once.

A notification popped up rewarding her with a hundred Karma for surviving until hatching, a sharp cracking noise accompanied a line of light that traced a random path across the surface of her shell, and Terri gasped and said, "Look, look!" Events didn't slow down. Danika backed away from the crack and where her tail brushed against the egg wall behind her, a new crack started. It shot a network of quickly expanding lines out and over her to join the original tracery of light.

There was a breathless pause and then the first piece of shell dropped away. A shimmering translucent barrier remained between ZipZing and the outside world for a moment, but when she moved, it bulged outward and pulled a bigger hole through the shell

as it carried her forward into the brighter exterior world.

As soon as Danika came in contact with the membrane, it broke, and she splashed out of her egg suddenly in a sticky puddle. She didn't have time to puzzle over the sudden wetness, because two different kinds of distant chime rang, one for a skill learned, and an unfamiliar one.

At the same time, Justin finished chanting something and a system notification popped up in front of Danika: "Received invitation to become Justin the Grey's familiar. Accept or Decline."

## *22: To Be or Not To Be*

Danika stared at the notification blankly for a moment. In the background Terri was exclaiming over how cute and tiny she was. After a long moment, Danika tapped decline.

Justin made a tossing gesture in her direction, but nothing seemed to happen, and he cursed softly, and reported, "It resisted the bond, and subdue failed."

Danika glanced at him warily, and quickly assumed the pose to call her menus and see what had changed on her character sheet.

Quin frowned at the sparkly little creature with butterfly-like wings, who was making such a familiar gesture. He pulled his own menu up with two quick taps over to the lens, while Justin quickly repeated the familiar bonding spell's chant.

Danika discovered that she'd learned a new spell, "Bond with Familiar". She tapped its info screen up but barely had time to skim the beginning of the full page of text before two more invitations popped up. One was a repeat of the invitation to become Justin's familiar, the other was a friend request from Quin.

Danika glared at Justin and said, "Stop that!"

Justin stared at her, open mouthed, and Terri gasped again and exclaimed, "It can talk! Oh, you can talk, and you're so cute, aren't you?"

Quin smothered a laugh and said politely, "Hello. Sorry about all this."

Justin gathered his wits and quickly protested, "But it would be very advantageous for you to become my familiar. It would double your lifespan, health and energy!"

Danika rolled her eyes and hit decline again, while replying, "If it would be so great, why don't you become my familiar instead!"

Quin laughed openly this time. Danika glanced at him and hesitated over the accept button. Quin asked Justin with amusement, "Yes, why don't you become ZipZing's familiar? It would definitely get you a place on the 'unique characters of Living Jade Empire' list!"

Justin argued, "It just hatched, even if it can become a wizard, it's a 3rd tier spell, who knows how long it would take?" Almost as an afterthought he asked, "You're naming it Zip Zing? What does that stand for?"

Danika exclaimed, "It's none of your business! I already know 'Bond with Familiar', but I think you're too arrogant to make a good pet."

Justin glared at her and made a little swiping motion. Danika realized suddenly that the tossing gesture he'd made before had actually been the motion he made when casting through his menu. She'd never seen someone else's menus before, and they showed as nothing but a faint shimmering outline.

Quin and Terri were both laughing now.

Justin flicked another spell at her and Danika almost instinctively dodged. Her hand hit

reject by accident as she avoided the feather made of light that darted toward her. It splashed into sparkles on the tabletop where her eggshell lay in fragments without affecting it.

Danika activated her wings, which seemed to beat more slowly than usual as she darted toward the window. Behind her Justin exclaimed, "Catch it!"

Terri made a belated movement toward her just as Danika streaked over the windowsill.

Quin spoke up quietly, "Let the novice go Justin, do you want to wear a PVP flag all week?"

Terri gasped and squeaked, "No way!"

Justin turned and stared at his friend for a long moment. "What?" he questioned at last.

--

The village was small, not much larger than the one in the beginner's vale. The houses seemed larger and had more stone in them, and the garden walls seemed higher. Danika looked around frantically for a good hiding spot, and darted toward another open window in the plainest of the buildings.

An old woman's voice chided, "It's polite to at least knock before entering someone's house."

Danika looked around the small crowded room, searching for the voice's owner for a long moment before realizing that it had come from underneath an enormous... hat? The probable hat was a vast construction of layers of dried flowers suspended in a wicker frame, with bows and ribbons puffing out of every possible gap.

The hat's identity solidified as it tilted backward and the wide brim lifted to reveal the wrinkled face that hid within its protective shadow. A smile greeted Danika, but the old woman didn't pause the steady stirring of the pot that hung over a tiny brazier on the low table in front of her.

"I'm sorry," Danika apologized quickly.

Outside voices rang out, and Danika recognized them. She zipped farther into the room instead of retreating, but she did ask, "But would you mind if I sit on your shelf here for awhile?"

The old woman said briskly, "If you don't mind doing me a favor after you're rested, you can stay as long as you like."

Danika settled on the overstuffed shelf and squeezed herself in behind a porcelain figure of a cat with its paw raised, and a glass ball in a stone stand.

Outside, closer than before, Quin called out, "ZipZing? Please come out? Justin won't hurt you, and he knows that you're a player now."

Danika hesitated, she wasn't even entirely certain why she was running away. As she dithered, Quin called out again, from farther away, "ZipZing? Hello?"

Terri complained faintly and volubly, "I don't think it's still in the village, how fast do you think it can fly? It was really tiny and quick wasn't it? It must be so cool to play a character like that."

Danika started to edge back around the porcelain cat, when another voice spoke, as if right beside her ear. Danika jumped and knocked the porcelain cat off the edge of the shelf.

Justin said, "Ah, um Zip Zing, please return to the tower. It's not safe for a novice outside this village."

Danika didn't even listen to his words, she dove after the porcelain cat and flicked through her casting menu in record time, hitting the cat with her featherweight spell just before it hit the floor. It bounced without shattering, and the old woman chuckled and said, "You're quite agile aren't you ZipZing. I know just the task you'd be good at."

## *23: Un Quest Complicare*

Danika lifted the cat awkwardly back into its place on the shelf before asking, "What task would I be good at?"

The old woman smiled cheerfully at Danika, and said, "Gathering moonflower seeds."

Danika finished positioning the porcelain cat, and thought distractedly that it was a little odd that there was no dust. She wondered if the shelves were just very clean, or if the game didn't have natural dust accumulation. It would, after all, be a lot of usually unnecessary data and calculation.

After a moment she collected herself and wondered how her mind had time to waste on dust when there were wizard voices in her ear, strange quests, and new spells. She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Do you mind if I ask you more about that later?" she asked the elderly NPC.

"Not at all," the old woman replied promptly. She stirred her pot contentedly, while Danika found a less crowded spot to perch. As soon as she had settled, the old woman suggested, "If you're low on energy, food will help."

Danika froze when Justin spoke again. This time he said, "If you're still where you can hear this, any of us are willing to escort you back to the capital where most human beginners start their adventures. Unfortunately Quin isn't sure that he could find the pixie pod you started in again."

The old woman shook her head and said, "Tsk tsk, young whippersnappers are so noisy for awhile after they learn their first broadcast spell or command voice."

Danika laughed, and then tapped the storage ring on her wrist. Her inventory popped open normally, and she breathed a sigh of relief and pulled out her pouch of holding. She gasped and dropped it, or rather, it almost crushed her as it fell. It was about 5 times as big as it had been.

Danika stared at her pouch for a long moment, and then opened it, she cautiously removed one of the candies from its inventory. It also seemed to have expanded in size. She felt really confused until it finally occurred to her that it wasn't that her stuff had expanded, it was that she had shrunk.

She examined herself this time. The fluid from her hatching had dried, but her wings seemed a little smaller and more rounded, which was probably why they'd felt like they were beating more slowly. Her reflection in the glass trinket beside her seemed generally more rounded. She sat down and ate her candy.

She didn't ask about what gathering moonflower seeds involved until she'd finished eating and gone through all of her menus to see what else had changed. The most important change seemed to be that "Survive Until Hatching" and its timer had been replaced by a new quest that said, "Growth Phase: Eat well, get plenty of sleep and exercise."

She hesitated at the inactive friend icon at the top of her quest list. She hadn't meant to dismiss Quin's request, but she hadn't been certain about accepting it either. Justin's

attempt to force her into being his familiar at hatching had felt very offensive somehow, and they seemed like really good friends. After a minute, Danika decided that she'd wait and see if they ran into each other again during their adventures.

Her new spell, 'Bond with Familiar', turned out to be quite complicated when she took the time to read the whole of its text. It required a list of exotic components to draw the spell circle and the chant that Justin had repeated was actually a vow, promising a lifelong partnership. Danika actually felt a little embarrassed for him, since he'd obviously thought he was saying it to an NPC.

When she finished, she closed her menus and finally asked about the moonflower seeds. The enormous hat tilted to the side thoughtfully and the old woman explained, carefully and in great detail, how to get through the frog filled swamp, past the grasping aspens, around the territory claimed by the silver wolverine, and to the meadow near the peak of the nearby mountain.

The little old woman in the wicker framed, floral, and beribboned hat also mentioned in passing, that she was the witch. Danika noted silently that the NPC definitely said **THE** witch, and not **A** witch. It could simply be a dialogue error, or it could mean the witch of the village. She also noted that she'd promised the witch a favor.

The moonflowers wouldn't bloom and reveal their seeds until the next full moon. Danika would have 3 weeks (or six days in real time) to learn the invisibility spell to pass the frogs, and gather the olives the witch needed to craft the slippery oil that would let her pass safely past the aspens. She would also have to be able to play at the right time to be in the meadow during the single hour that the seeds would be available.

Danika considered the quest seriously. The words of the adventurers implied strongly that the local area was too dangerous for a beginner. But... she would be able to learn an invisibility spell! Danika finally decided that since the worst case would be that she died and had to reincarnate, which she'd already risked when she fought that first slime, she might as well try.

She told the old witch simply, "I'll try."

The old woman chuckled and the hat jiggled as she said, "You'll have to wake Arthur as your first challenge."

Danika glanced around and then asked, "Arthur?"

"My toad," the witch explained. "The one who will teach you the invisibility spell. He's quite good at it, but he's sleeping in the well outside again. I can hear him snoring."

## *24: Toadally Invisible*

Danika listened carefully, but couldn't hear anything like snoring from inside the sturdy house. She activated her wings and flew cautiously to the window and peeked out. She saw no trace of the three other players, so she darted out and zipped quickly around the house. There was a covered wishing style well in the garden behind the house.

Danika hovered near it, but still couldn't hear anything resembling snoring. There was however a sort of soft rhythmic creaking coming from the well. She peered into the darkness warily. She was fairly certain that frogs and toads would eat butterflies.

Danika cast her light cantrip, which had advanced to 4 seconds with 4 particles and sent them into the well in a spinning spiral formation that lit all sides of the well at once as it descended. The soft rhythmic creaking didn't change even when the particles of light descended into the clear dark water at the bottom of the well at the last second. Shadowy figures darted away from the lights, which didn't reach a bottom before they timed out.

The walls of the well were lined in knobby cobble stones, with plenty of small damp ledges and nooks, but Danika hadn't spotted any toads on the first try. After a moment of thought, she realized that the toad that was supposed to teach her invisibility might very well actually be invisible. Although for his spell to last while he slept, he would have to have a very high level, if its duration worked like the spells Danika knew about so far.

Danika recalled the fire elemental that Justin had summoned to warm her egg, it had appeared to last for days instead of seconds. She stared into the dark well and wished that she could return to his tower and ask if she could borrow a lasting light. A mix of irritation, pride and embarrassment prevented her, so instead she sent her cantrip into the darkness again and followed it down.

She tried to pinpoint the source of the creaking, but inside the well it seemed to echo quietly from all sides at once. When her light vanished, she increased her own dazzle hopefully, and discovered that while much softer, it was bright enough to reflect off the damp stones and her eyes were able to adjust to see all but the darkest nooks.

Her dazzle was more of a continuous effect, that did drain energy slowly while activated, but not nearly as quickly as the brighter light of her spell, so Danika took her time and looked and listened carefully for any hint of the toad's location. Sometimes the creaking seemed louder than others, but she couldn't pinpoint it. Occasionally she found a dryer spot on the walls, but when she zipped close and poked those spots, she always touched cool stone.

After awhile she tried simply shouting, "Wake up Arthur!" Birds in the trees overhead fluttered away, but nothing inside the well changed. Danika scrunched up her face and thought about the kind of things that might wake her up aside from light and noise. Smells, she decided after a bit of thought, especially smells of food.

She zipped out of the well, and looked around the walled garden more carefully. There were insects working busily among the many plants. It was actually a very busy place, once she stopped to watch carefully. She spotted a hedgehog in one corner, there were birds and squirrels in the trees, and little frogs with long tongues hunting beneath large leafy vegetable plants. A garden snake startled her by snapping up one of the frogs and swallowing it.



Danika retreated to the roof of the small house before pulling her pouch out. She sorted quickly through her foods and decided that the crumbly cheese was the most fragrant. She quickly broke off a piece small enough to fly with, and put everything away, before zipping back into the well.

"Breakfast?" Danika called out hopefully. A crumb dropped into the water and something snapped it up. The creaking noise stopped, giving her a second's warning before a large figure separated from the wall and jumped toward her. Danika dropped the cheese and evaded it by zipping straight into the sky.

The cheese didn't have time to fall, it was snapped up instantly by the large toad that landed against the far side and then glared up at Danika and commented darkly, "Not bad, but you look positively delicious little butterfly lizard."

Danika gulped, and said quickly, "If you're Arthur, the witch said I had to wake you up, and that you'll teach me your invisibility spell."

"Oh," Arthur said glumly. "Unfortunately, that is my name." He heaved a sigh and jumped up to sit on the edge of the well. Even in the light he still blended well with the colors of the stone.

Curiosity compelled Danika to bring up the lens from her menus and look at the toad again. It said, "Arthur the Witch's Toad." She tapped to see his description, half expecting it to say that he was formerly a prince. Instead it read:

Accumulated Level: 45

This ancient toad is an accomplished ambush predator. Toads typically have shorter tongues than frogs, but are said to never miss their prey.

Arthur grumbled, "I hate teaching novices."

Danika asked curiously, "Have you taught many?"

Arthur replied, "None." Danika blinked at him, and had just opened her mouth when he added sharply, "Most people have the courtesy to have chosen their path and learned all of the the basic cantrips before coming here to bother me."

After a moment Danika asked worriedly, "Do I need to know all of the basic cantrips before learning invisibility? How many are there?"

"Choose your magical path properly, and you'll find out," the toad answered grumpily. Danika shook her head in quick refusal, and after a moment he relented and said, "Technically you only need to learn one more cantrip before you can learn invisibility." He eyed her and Danika would have called his expression a smirk as he added, "But the witch didn't say I had to teach you that."

Danika frowned at the toad and then said a little slyly, "But since she said you'll teach me invisibility, can you really refuse?" She added sweetly, "She also said that you're really good at it."

Arthur sniffed and grumbled, "Good at it? I'm the best."

Danika opened her eyes very wide and said hopefully, "Then surely I can't ask to learn

from a better teacher."

"Certainly not!" Arthur declared. He sniffed again and then grumbled, "Well, get down here then and prove that you can learn to look like mud in a reasonable amount of time."

Danika landed in front of the large toad very cautiously. His description as an ambush predator made her nervous. It took Danika several long, muddy hours to learn to look like mud. The cantrip 'color' seemed quite simple, but like 'light' it was tricky.

It was easy enough to turn something grass green, but if you really looked at grass, it usually wasn't just green. She had to level it up until she could produce more than one shade, and choose shades that blended well before Arthur grudgingly allowed that she looked somewhat like mud. Still, the chickens had been worse.

Once her three second impression of mud finally satisfied the toad, he taught her invisibility. Danika loved it. With just a simple flick of a spell ZipZing could vanish instantly, even in mid flight.

Arthur warned her grouchily before retreating into the well again, "There's nothing to be so happy about. If you don't practice hard and extend the time a lot, you won't even get past the first frog."

## 25: Olive View

"How did you know I'm trying to get past the frogs?" Danika asked as the large toad vanished over the edge of the well.

"I'm old, not deaf," Arthur snapped, in a hollow echoey voice from within the well. "Just be thankful she isn't sending you out to collect frogs teeth."

'But weren't you sleeping?' Danika wondered silently, somehow she didn't actually dare to ask.

Her alarm for taking a break had gone off during her training but Danika had dismissed it, so now she logged out for a late lunch. She made up slices of cheese, bread and apple again, and while she ate them she pondered ZipZing's food supply.

Keeping her energy charging while she practiced spells used up a surprising quantity of food. Danika would bet that her character could easily surpass a hummingbird in consuming her own weight each day when she was leveling spells. An idea occurred to her, and she logged onto the forums to see if anyone had any data on her plant growth spell.

There was a LOT of data on both plant growth spells and the growth of various plants. Danika was startled to find that "Living Jade Empire" already had an entire community of gardeners and farmers. She hadn't really paid that much attention to what kinds of plants were surrounding her in the scenery of the game, but apparently it had an enormous catalog of relatively realistic plants and had attracted an entire subculture of gamers.

Danika felt as though she ought to be wearing a sweat drop emote on her head as she combed dozens of guides on growing fruits and vegetables in "Living Jade Empire". Some of them even included game maps of where the plants were available for collection in the wild, and where the most fertile regions to buy land were. Danika realized that she didn't even know the name of the village that ZipZing was in.

She had been building a small chart of possible plants when she found the spreadsheet built and maintained by Olea Flos. Not only did it include growth times, soils and yields, but it had links to both real world varieties and catalog pages for in game varieties. Danika was a little astounded by some of the digressions on soils and weather systems in the comments under the article on radishes, which could be grown in as little as 21 days even without growth spells.

ZipZing's plant growth spell turned out to be the most common and most versatile, there were others that could affect whole fields, but the one she'd learned in the beginner's vale was recommended by almost everyone. It leveled up much like her featherweight spell, where the first level of casting was actually the most powerful. The spell time lapsed the plant toward maturity starting at  $\frac{1}{2}$  and continued in sequence, the next level being  $\frac{2}{3}$ , then  $\frac{3}{4}$  and so forth. It had no effect on a plant that had already reached maturity, but could also target individual fruits and seeds.

When Danika returned to "Living Jade Empire", she zipped around the house and stopped at the window ledge and knocked. It wasn't a very loud sound, but the witch chuckled, which made the hat jiggle, and promptly said, "Come in, you must be ready for your next task."

Danika nodded but asked, "What's the name of this village?"

The witch made a tsking noise, and replied, "The townsfolk will be sad to know a little novice is calling such an ancient town a village. This is Oliva, named after the oldest tree in the world. That very tree still grows on the low shale hill in the center of town. It's quite a famous view, and where you'll find the olives I need for your slippery oil."

Danika asked curiously, "Is it ok to just take them?"

The witch chuckled again and said, "Certainly. The difficult part will be evading the wasps that feed on the pests that try to attack the tree."

Danika had a horrible premonition that she was about to be regarded as one of those pests. Before she headed out to the tree, she asked hopefully, "Do you have any advice?"

The hat tilted back far enough for Danika to see the old woman's grin as she replied, "Always wash between your toes and behind your ears, drink plenty of water, get plenty of rest," Danika rolled her eyes and the witch added, "and try not to let the wasps see you."

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The tree stood near Justin's tower, with its wide dark windows and pale stone. The tower was taller than the tree, but the tree's gnarled trunk was nearly as big around as the tower. Danika's earlier flight from his window had bypassed the little shale hill that stood as the town square.

The ancient tree made a pretty contrast with the pale shale that it tangled its roots into. Its silver green leaves stretched out from every branch like fingers reaching out to cup the sunlight. The traveling merchant stood in the shade below the tree.

The merchant looked up as Danika approached and greeted her warmly, "Hello ZipZing! I'm glad to see that you hatched safely. I see that you've already grown quite a bit!"

Danika blinked, and asked, "Have I?"

The traveling merchant laughed cheerfully and pulled a mirror out of his pack and held it up for her. Her appearance wasn't as rounded as it had been right after hatching. The merchant said helpfully, "All it takes to grow well is plenty of food, rest, and exercise."

Danika said doubtfully, "I have eaten quite a lot, and I've been pretty active, but I haven't really made time to rest yet?"

The merchant replied with amusement, "Oh? Didn't you only resume your adventures a few minutes ago?"

Danika blinked and then laughed, she had been logged out for the entire two hours of "night" while she ate her lunch and browsed information on plants. "Yes," she agreed happily. "Do you have any radish seeds for sale?" she asked hopefully.

"I do," he agreed promptly, "but where would you plant them? There are a lot of dangers waiting in the wilderness outside this village, and you don't own any garden or field

of your own."

Danika sighed, it had seemed like such a promising idea. She spent the last of the coins she had leftover from the slimes on replenishing her pouch of food instead.

The merchant asked, as she handed over the last coin, "Did you happen to save any of your eggshell? The shards are quite valuable."

Danika frowned and glanced toward Justin's tower. After a moment she shook her head. If her shell was valuable, she rather felt that it ought to belong to Quin anyway, since he'd spent such a sum on it.

"That's ok," the merchant said cheerfully, "there are many valuable resources in this area, such as rare butterflies, resinous woods, flower seeds, and frogs teeth."

Danika eyed him doubtfully and questioned, "Frogs teeth?" She had thought the witch's toad had been suggesting something impossible to obtain.

"Indeed," he agreed seriously. "The large frogs in the swamps nearby are quite dangerous, but also popular because their teeth are large enough to collect easily."

"Oh," she replied. "My next task is to collect olives though."

The merchant turned and observed the tree for a moment before saying, "That seems a bit tricky, as the tree is still blooming and there are only a few tiny green ones developing already." He didn't linger as long as he had in the beginner's vale, instead he set off after a few parting words. "Good luck, I'll see you again soon ZipZing."

Danika observed the ancient tree with its delicate white flowers and small green olive buds among the silvery leaves for awhile before approaching it.

## *26: Waspish*

A handful of wasps buzzed around among the olive branches, visiting flowers now and then with apparent laziness. They seemed quite large, almost ¼ of ZipZing's size.

Danika discovered that she was surprisingly nervous about approaching the wasps. She wasn't especially afraid of bugs in general. Usually she regarded wasps as irritating pests, but nothing to be scared of. Her own reaction surprised her a little.

Her invisibility spell only lasted for a single second at the moment, but Danika slowly formed a plan as she watched the tree. When she felt ready, she zipped toward the tree, flicking her invisibility up mid flight. She got the timing surprisingly close on her first try, and it gave out just before she reached the branch she was aiming at.

She activated her color cantrip, and became more silvery green like the leaves. As quickly as she could she targeted one of the tiny olive buds with her plant growth spell. Her color cantrip ran out and had to be reactivated before the olive finished swelling in size and plumpness. Danika grabbed the olive and pulled it off with her dragon strength before launching herself away from the tree and casting invisibility again.

The olive was surprisingly heavy and pulled her downward as she flew away from the tree. She landed heavily but safely on the loose shale.

Danika looked at the olive thoughtfully, and tried biting it. She spat out the bite immediately. She had hoped she could eat some of the olives to replenish her energy. She wasn't certain if it was a problem with the game or if real olives tasted so awful raw, but it was too horribly bitter to eat. Regretfully she withdrew some bread from her inventory.

Eventually she worked out a somewhat more efficient harvesting method. Instead of retreating after collecting a single olive, she moved things around in her inventory so that the oldest salt sack was free to fill with olives. Then, while clinging to her target branch she cast as many growth spells on as many olives as she could reach, as quickly as possible. By the time that was finished the first targets had finished growing, and she collected them all before zipping away from the tree.

She had successfully delivered the first five bags of olives to the witch before a wasp caught and stung her. The sting not only hurt, but seemed to paralyze her. Probably fortunately, she seemed to be too heavy for the wasp to carry, and fell out of the tree.

Danika hit the shale hard and bounced a couple of times until she came to rest against something darker than the pale shale. When she levered herself up enough to look, she discovered that it was a boot. With a sinking heart, she raised her eyes to discover that the boot belonged to a human wizard.

Justin glared down at her and asked waspishly, "How can you almost die while still within the village!?"

Danika wondered if the townspeople would be sad that a high level wizard was also referring to their town as a village, or if that kind of thing was just expected from wizards.

Justin nudged her with his toe and snapped, "I can tell that you're not dead yet, and you've already demonstrated that you can talk."

Danika sighed and answered a bit glumly, "Why do you care?"

His mouth tightened and he threw up his hands and simply walked away. Danika lay on the cold shale and wondered why they seemed to clash so much when they'd really had so little interaction with each other. A moment later a bright red apple bounced off the shale beside her.

When the venom wore off enough that Danika could move freely again, she collected the apple. It was so very red and glossy that it resembled nothing so much as the poisoned apple from 'Snow White', but Danika didn't expect that it was really poisoned. As she placed it into her pouch alongside the elven wizard's yellow apple, she wondered what it was with wizards and apples.

She ate the last of the bread she'd been working on, and logged off for awhile to let her health restore and to rest a bit for her ongoing 'Growth Phase' quest.

--

On her first attempt after Danika returned, she was too nervous, and another wasp spotted her. They seemed to hunt mostly by sight, because it lost her again as soon as she recast her invisibility. Danika retreated while they buzzed around more actively for a little while.

She found that as long as she waited for a while before trying again after being detected, she was able to collect more olives without injury. She made less timing mistakes as she calmed down, and her invisibility spell slowly increased in duration as it leveled.

To her delight, her flight skill finally leveled up during one particularly tricky maneuver dodging around a twisted branch that she'd already harvested while recasting invisibility. Danika collected ten more bags of olives before she slept that night.

--

Danika checked her messages while she ate breakfast the next morning, and sat staring at her screen for a long while in a state of stunned surprise. The leveling job had not only been paid already, it had included an added bonus.

Not only that, but the person who'd submitted it had sent a contract request for leveling 20 more accounts at the same rate within two weeks. Danika wanted to cry. It was a fantastic offer, but it was impossible for one person to accomplish, even if she ran multiple accounts at the same time, and stopped playing "Living Jade Empire" for awhile, the most she could possibly finish would be five or six.

She was reluctant to give it up though, so she contacted a couple of the places that she did contract work with moderately regularly. The smaller one got back to her first. Unfortunately, after calculating it, the manager replied that they just didn't currently have the capacity to finish it in time.

Danika logged into "Living Jade Empire" on her phone, while she waited for a response from the larger game studio. Flying accurately was a lot trickier, especially while trying to cast invisibility, but the color cantrip was ridiculously easy through the mobile interface. Matching colors was a simple targeting tap.

She collected two more bags of olives before she got a reply. The owner called her personally to discuss the exact details, but eventually agreed to take on the job under the conditions that Danika was requesting. The first was that she got a 10% commission for transferring the job to the company. The second was that she would also be one of the people paid to work on it, but have a day off on the day that she was supposed to collect the moonflower seeds in "Living Jade Empire", although she didn't explain why she needed that particular day off.

The job started right away. Danika logged in for her first shift, almost gleefully. Working on a single account through a familiar remote interface gave her enough idle time to collect more olives on her phone once in awhile.

--

Danika returned to the VR-medi pod that night in a cheerful mood. Although her olive collecting had been slowed down, and she was only  $\frac{1}{4}$  the way through the amount the witch said she needed, Danika still had three more days before her scheduled day off to collect moonflowers.

Danika collected several more salt bags full of olives before sleeping. By the time she finished, two days later, her plant growth spell had gained a level and her invisibility could last up to 5 seconds.

The only thing that really worried her was that she had used up most of her food again before she collected enough olives for the witch's oil.



## *27: Moonflower Seeds*

The oil production was the first time that Danika saw the witch move away from her little brazier.

The olives were washed in a large basin where the water formed itself into tiny scrub brushes that thoroughly washed each olive under the witch's supervision. Then, to all appearances, the olives obediently rolled themselves into a basket that was definitely too small to hold them. It must have been enchanted, because they fit neatly.

The witch hefted the small basket and an empty jug, and carried them out of her house to the town mill. There, the olives were ground beneath a large stone wheel until they turned into a paste. The mushy paste gathered itself up into a ball, and the witch moved it into a large stone press.

The witch cast another spell that made a yellowy green liquid almost instantly begin to pour out of the press and into the waiting jug. When the jug was full the witch informed Danika, "It must rest for a couple of days now. When the olive oil has risen, I can craft the slippery oil for you."

Danika spent an anxious moment before remembering that a day was only 6 hours long and that the witch would be able to start crafting after about twelve hours. She said, "Thank you," and asked, "is there anything else I should prepare before setting out for the moonflowers?"

The old woman tilted her head back, so that the enormous wicker and flower construction of her hat tilted dangerously, and her wide smile was revealed. "Get plenty of rest and grow as much as you can," the witch suggested kindly.

Danika nodded, and took her advice. She logged out of "Living Jade Empire" and worked on catching up a bit on the little household chores that she sometimes let slide when she got busy. Her house plants were watered and her little apartment was satisfactorily tidy by the time her shift started a couple of hours later.

--

Instead of logging in on her phone when she had time, Danika posted a bit more about her adventures as a fairy dragon so far, and what her experience as an egg had been like. When her shift was finished, she ate a quick supper and hurried back into the VR-medi pod.

The witch greeted her cheerfully, saying, "You've grown well."

Danika tried to examine her reflection on one of the shiner trinkets. She couldn't see much difference, but she was surprised to discover that the porcelain cat that she'd hid behind a few days ago was now barely half her size. She checked her quest list to verify that "Growth Phase" was still active, and it was.

The witch gave her a small green bottle with a cork stopper and warned her, "This is all the slippery oil that I could make. It would be best if you don't get caught by the grasping aspens very often, but you shouldn't need more than a fraction of the bottle to make yourself slippery enough to escape."

Danika set her alarm early on her day off, so that she would have plenty of time to reach the meadow in Living Jade Empire" before the moonflowers bloomed.

She found the frog swamp, that lay just beyond the town and below the mountain, fascinating and dangerously distracting. She darted across it with much the same technique she'd used in the olive tree. She zipped invisibly from spot to spot, and used her color cantrip to blend wherever she landed.

Brilliant butterflies, dragonflies, and other insects danced in the muggy air. A few of the butterflies were even larger than ZipZing. The water was mirror smooth except when the occasional splash sent rings spilling out to dissipate against the reeds and marsh plants that clung to every small hillock.

Enormous lilies bloomed and crowded the surface everywhere a larger pool of water had formed. And then there were the frogs. Their skins were shiny and colorfully streaked in blue and teal. The smallest seemed to be about the same size as ZipZing, the largest she mistook for a small island, which was a nearly fatal mistake.

If the frog hadn't been almost as startled as she was, when she landed between its eyes and they opened, she'd never have evaded it. Instead she flicked her invisibility spell again and zipped across its back. It turned quickly and its tongue seemed to stretch impossibly far, but it missed.

When she finally reached the border of the forest she landed on a black spruce, that conveniently trailed dark branches toward the swamp, and took a moment to rest. The forest ahead rose sharply as the steep ground turned mountainous. Danika hunted for the cliff that had been described as her next landmark, its even folds laying like a paper fan.

As she flew higher, the softer conifers turned to bristly pines interspersed with maples, and eventually the maples gave way to aspens. The aspens looked pretty and harmless enough. Their rounded leaves, with little points tipping each one, trembled in the cool breeze that swept along the mountain creating a million tiny clatters that blended into a soft, almost tidal, noise.

Even though she'd been warned, Danika felt like her heart stopped the first time an aspen branch stretched out and the leaves began to flatten themselves against her. The edges of the leaves suddenly seemed dangerously sharp, and Danika hastily slapped her wrist before her arms were immobilized and pulled the slippery oil from her inventory.

She used more than necessary that first time, in her anxious haste, but it worked perfectly. As the oil spread across her skin, the leaves lost all purchase and she flew out of their grasp as easily as brushing past an ordinary tree branch. Unfortunately the oil vanished from the surface of her skin a few moments later, the way moisturizing creams always advertised that they would, but never did.

When the aspens began to give way, Danika tensed up instead of relaxing. The witch had been a little too detailed in her description of how the silver wolverine would hunt animals much larger than itself, and store the extra meat high on the mountain in the snow. She'd told ZipZing how the dangerous animal would even crunch up its prey's bones and teeth when it was especially hungry.

Danika was very, very careful, to give each of the landmarks the witch had described as bordering the wolverine territory a wide berth. She also sniffed the air often, hoping not to detect any strong musky scents, and kept a careful watch for any movement among the tough scrubby shrubbery that clung to the mountain this high up.

Despite her worries and close calls, Danika reached the moonflower meadow in plenty of time. It occupied a small cupped plateau just below the snowline, and the view from the edge that spilled down the mountain side was breathtaking. The meadow appeared to be covered in tightly furled morning glory vines, but her identify plant skill informed her reassuringly that they were indeed moonflowers.

Danika looked down at the little town that seemed impossibly far below her, and wondered if the game had cheated and exaggerated the perspective. Beyond the town the landscape rolled in a tumble of wild forests and open fields, that gave way in the farthest distance to a more familiar patchwork landscape of farms and roads. So tiny and distant that she wasn't certain it wasn't imagination, a city thrust towers up against the horizon.

She watched a brilliant sunset give way to more stars than she'd ever seen in her lifetime before the moon finally rose and the moonflowers opened. The dark meadow transformed into an enchanted garden as the pale flowers unfolded their softly glowing petals.

Each flower lasted for only one bell beneath the moon and then, faster than any earthly flower, would coil its petals up and shrivel away into a pea-like pod that held a few treasured moonflower seeds. The witch had warned her that although the pods would remain after the moon set, the seeds energy would soon be reabsorbed by the vines, and they would go dormant.

Danika gathered seed pods as quickly as possible as the moon slid too quickly along its arc across the sky. She zipped back and forth across the meadow as she stuffed them into the elaborately embroidered silken pouch of holding that the witch had provided for them. Her concentration was so fierce that at first she didn't notice as the soft blue lights of the flowers scattered across meadow were stained purple by the red glow growing in the sky.

## ***28: Meteor Shower***

"Red light?" Danika asked aloud when she finally noticed the increasingly red glow that tinted the meadow ominously. A shadowy figure on the edge of the meadow startled at the sound of her voice, but the movement passed unnoticed. She raised her face to the moon, which still glowed silver-white above the horizon, to find the sky above streaked with red stars.

Danika reacted by stuffing the pouch full of seeds into her inventory, and a split second later a pair of human hands grabbed her and clutched her firmly. Before she could even shriek, a man's voice said frantically, "If you're still alive after it hits, please pull the dagger out of me within 5 minutes!"

One of his hands released her, but Danika was still unable to escape. She gasped in horror as he curled over and thrust both her and the dagger that appeared in his other hand hard against his own chest. With a horrible crackling noise, he turned to stone, and then the entire world melted beneath a rain of fire.

Eventually, a minute of eternity later, the molten shower of dying stars dwindled and then died. It left behind a charred and blasted landscape in every direction, with tiny flames still dancing at the edges. Puffs of steam emitted fading screams here and there in the snow higher up the slope.

Danika was still alive. She was singed and roasted, and she wasn't sure she had any skin left outside of the areas covered by the stone hand that still clutched her against the stone chest. After a long moment, she reached for the dagger beside her, but froze, when a voice overhead asked, "Did we finally get him? You're sure he doesn't have enough left to revive again?"

Another voice answered, "Yes, I'm sure! And yes, we got him! Look, he tried to use some kind of stone defense, but he's shattered. Ha, finally that rich brat will have to start completely over!"

A voice Danika recognized said accusingly, "You lied to me!"

The first voice replied with confusion, "What are you talking about?"

Justin said with disgust, "Look at me you idiot. You guys owe me ten times the amount you paid!"

The other voice gasped and squeaked, "Red PVP flag!"

Justin accused, "You swore that he was still under his own PVP flag, and that this would only cost me one day of green PVP status."

"I don't understand," the first voice said defensively, "he was, I swear." His voice got fainter as he protested, "Hey, stop, where are you taking us?"

The distance seemed to be increasing rapidly, and Danika barely made out Justin's last sharp sentence, "Back to my tower, where I'll be stuck for the next week!"

After a minute, Danika struggled to pull out the dagger. She didn't have enough

leverage where she was trapped in the stone hand, so she tapped her ring and pulled out the bottle of slippery witch's oil. She dumped the rest of it over her head and tried to spread it under the stone by wriggling. Thankfully it worked, and she soon slipped out of the hand. Unfortunately, every movement hurt.

Danika stared up at the figure of the man who'd grabbed her. The voice hadn't lied, he was shattered in many places. Grimly, she started the restore prayer as she propped her feet against his knees and pulled the dagger out with her dragon's strength.

As the dagger slid out, stone became flesh, and the flesh bled. The prayer was granted, but Danika wasn't certain it was successful, until he spoke.

His voice was flat as he said rapidly, "What the hell is a little novice character doing here? Are you with them? I swear if you are, I'll kill you until you have to restart your character, even if you did pull the knife out in time to unstone me!" He stopped talking abruptly and his head swiveled, after a moment he asked, "Is that my elbow? And that's definitely an ear, but..."

Danika turned and stared at the shattered remains of his elbow and other fragments on the ground without answering.

After a long silent moment, he reached for her. She tried to evade his grasp, but failed. Either he was too fast, or she was too slow. He held her up to his face and said flatly, "I'm sorry. It looks like I really owe you."

Danika said sharply, "Then let me go!"

He released her, and she fell. He didn't let her hit the ground though. He caught her, but this time he didn't grip her, instead he supported her on open palms. "I'm really sorry, you look like you're in bad shape too. Do you have anything left to heal yourself? I'm all out of potions and Karma. I can't imagine how much it cost you to heal me from that."

Danika pulled up her menus without answering. She felt cold and shivery. Her health bar was very low and still dropping, so she repeated the restore prayer. She gazed regretfully at her Karma stat as it dropped another 30 points, but her body warmed as her health and energy refilled, and the pain vanished.

"87 Karma," she reported the amount his restoration had cost her. She had only 12 Karma left. If she died now, at level 35 she wouldn't be able to revive, and all the time she'd spent earning enough Karma to play a dragon's child would be wasted.

She shivered, thinking of the dangerous return trip to the witch's house. After a moment she gazed up at him. She hoped he was worth it.

"I'll buy more Karma and pay you back," he promised when their eyes met.

"You can't buy Karma," Danika pointed out dryly.

"Of course you can," he corrected, "just not from the game company. Priests of the God of Balance can transfer Karma between players, as long as both parties are willing."

Danika frowned up at him disapprovingly.

He smiled at her, a quick expression that vanished as he said strangely without inflection, "Wow you are really cute."

## ***29: Artificial Beauty***

Danika couldn't help it, she laughed.

"I'm serious," he said.

"I know I really am super cute aren't I?" she agreed with sudden enthusiasm. "And look," she said as she activated her dazzling.

He blinked and said, "Sorry, that skill won't work on me, but it does make you even cuter."

Danika grinned and agreed, "I know, right?" She looked at his expressionless face, then blushed and added, "But you look great too!" She dropped her gaze and realized that his equipment hadn't been magically restored by her spell, and his character was dressed in tatters that left his body barely decent. She returned her gaze to his face and specified quickly, "You have a really pretty face!"

His expression didn't change, but he said, "It's just a face."

Danika babbled nervously, "I know. I mean, it's just your character, but it's your aesthetic taste too. I love the look you gave yourself."

He smiled that quickly vanishing smile again and asked curiously, "You don't recognize this avatar?"

Danika shook her head and said, "No? Sorry?"

He laughed shortly and said flatly, "Nevermind, it's just some pop star."

"Ah," Danika said after a moment. No wonder the people hunting him had called him a rich brat. Using a licensed figure was really expensive, in real money. Most people who wanted to look like a particular idol just modified their appearance to be similar.

"You're using VR," he said.

"Yes," she agreed warily.

"Do you want me to get my headset so you can hear me actually talking? I haven't ever talked this much in the game before, but it must seem kind of creepy," he suggested.

Danika stared at his face and then gasped and asked, "You're on your phone?"

He nodded shortly.

"That's amazing," she declared.

"Why?" he questioned.

She waved her hands helplessly before trying to explain, "You seem totally real. Only kind of expressionless."

He laughed again, only this time the sound was richer. And when he spoke, his voice was more complex and carried inflections, even though his expression didn't change. "You're right, it is pretty amazing how fast the game translates everything you're saying into text too. It shows the power of those big computers they have out in space I guess. Say something else now that I can hear you."

Danika just stared at him open mouthed and blushed. Her wings sparkled with a rosy color.

"So cute," he said with a chuckle.

Someone else spoke faintly in the invisible background wherever he was, a voice asked, "Are you talking to a girl?"

He replied dryly, "I haven't asked their gender, don't act like a jerk." He added, "They look really cute either way."

"Only here though," Danika protested.

He was silent for a moment, but instead of commenting on her voice he said speculatively, "I don't know, but I think you're probably pretty cute all the time. I bet you didn't change your appearance much."

She rolled her eyes and said facetiously, "Of course not, I always have wings and claws."

He laughed and corrected, "You mean you're always a little plump and have green eyes?"

Danika stared at him, and he winked and smiled at her. Now that she knew that he was on his phone, she could recognize the short expressions as emotes.

"Woah, he's flirting now! Hey guys, come look at this!" called out the faint voice in the background. A bit louder, the voice asked, "What is that?"

His character gave a quick eye roll as he answered the person, "A novice fairy dragon."

"Ooh, your girlfriend's a dragon?" asked a deeper voice.

He said sharply, "You guys are idiots, shove off." And then he said uncomfortably, "Sorry, they're always like this, but not bad friends."

"How do you kiss a dragon?" the first voice asked laughingly in the background.

"We can just be friends you know," he said with exasperation, and then there was a sharp noise that Danika thought was probably a door shutting.

A system prompt appeared in front of Danika with a friend invite from Aishin. After a moment she tapped accept.

Aishin blinked and then asked, "What? How did you just add yourself to my friend list?"



Danika replied with confusion, "You invited me."

"No I didn't," he refuted. A short silence fell between them. After a minute he said awkwardly, "I don't have anyone on my friend list. This is what I do for quiet time."

After another long moment Danika asked, "Is this actually your first time using voice in this game?"

"No," he denied, "during setup it needed voice samples and," he added a little defensively, "I've used voice a few times."

Danika flicked to her friend list and removed him, before explaining, "If you're touching someone when you say something like 'we can be friends' or 'add friend', it sends out an invitation. Your mentor in the vale should have explained that?"

"You didn't have to do that," he said quietly.

Danika shrugged without looking at his face and replied, "It's fine, you didn't mean it."

"I mean it this time, let's be friends," he said firmly, and another friend invite popped up. This time it showed Danika the option to block friend requests from him, as well as accept or decline.

"Why?" she asked without choosing a response. "You don't have to change your way of playing."

"I won't," he replied dryly, "if you send me a dozen messages every time I log on, I'll probably remove you."

Danika glanced up at him.

He laughed and asked, "You followed some convoluted quest to get here that forced you to be here at this time didn't you?"

"Yes?" Danika agreed doubtfully.

Aishin said speculatively, "We must have incredibly high compatibility then, I wonder why?"

"What do you mean?" she questioned.

"Haven't you noticed that this game is always analyzing us?" he asked. "It likes putting things from your searches or that you've talked about recently into your quests and stuff. It also likes to arrange things so that you meet people you could be friends with in dramatic situations."

Danika rolled her eyes and said, "'Living Jade Empire' pretty much advertises that it uses data mining to create individualized quests, but that doesn't mean that it's arranging for us to meet. Those were players chasing you."

"Well, it's just my theory," Aishin said. "I think the game herded us all to this spot at this time. And I feel like it keeps trying to introduce me to likely people because I don't have

anyone in my list."

"So put someone in your list and see if it stops?" Danika suggested logically.

Aishin winked and told her, "Accept again then."

Danika wrinkled her nose at him and said teasingly, "I don't know about adding a strange guy who says he'll remove me if I talk too much."

Aishin didn't laugh. His character didn't move at all for a long minute. Danika wondered if he'd disconnected when he said, "But it would be a lie if I said I won't."

Somehow it seemed like such a painfully honest reply. Another moment of silence passed before she asked, "But you don't seem to mind talking right now?"

"I know," he replied.

"And this is not a single player game," she pointed out.

He flicked a smile at her and answered, "I know." He raised his hands, which she'd almost forgotten that she was sitting on, so that they were eye to eye. "Will you risk it?" he asked challengingly.

After a moment she nodded, and hit accept.

### ***30: Warm Ash and Cold Blade***

Danika thought, with wry amusement, that one of the things they had in common was that this apparently gave them each one person on their friend list. She didn't tell Aishin that though, she didn't know him well enough yet.

She looked around the little meadow sadly, nothing was left of the moonflowers but drifting ash, stirring in the breeze. After a moment she activated her wings and lifted herself out of her new friend's hands.

Aishin watched her for a moment, and then the faint glowing traces of his menu screens appeared. He grumbled, "Ugh, it looks like my pouches disintegrated under that meteor shower, and all I have left is what's in my storage bands."

Reminded of storage pouches, Danika landed cautiously in the center of the meadow. The ground was cooling quickly, and not uncomfortably warm, so she pulled out the moonflower seed pouch, and withdrew a pod, before storing them safely again.

Aishin stared at her and said "Wow!" He asked quickly, "How do you have such a high quality storage ring when you're still just a novice?"

Danika looked back at him and protested, "It only has three storage spaces."

"But that was a pouch of holding you just used wasn't it?" Aishin questioned.

Danika nodded.

Aishin laughed and shook his head. "You don't want to know how much the stackable inventory spaces cost when you're trying to get the enchantment."

Danika protested, "The pouch I bought from the traveling merchant only cost 200 coins."

Aishin nodded and agreed, "Yeah, I bought that one while in the beginner's vale too, it's more expensive later. But it's got a normal space enchantment, it won't hold other items with inventory spaces."

Danika shrugged and said, "The smith gave it to me, he said I was too small for a normal pack."

"Oh, that's true," Aishin agreed, "and the pack had 20 spaces. I guess you just got special starter equipment suited to your character, but don't sell that ring, you won't be able to replace it for ages."

"Ok," Danika agreed easily.

She carefully cracked the seed pod. The moon had set and dawn was starting to lighten the sky, but the seeds still glowed softly. She planted them about a meter from each other and cast her plant growth on each one. Little vines sprouted and curled out quickly.

When the spell finished, they still looked lonely, with their  $\frac{2}{3}$  grown vines tangling through the ashes, but it seemed like the most she could do.

Aishin commented quietly, "Don't worry it'll regenerate, it's just a game."

Danika turned to look at him. He was dressed in snug dark clothes with his face covered. He rummaged through the bloody mess on the ground and started pulling out blades. Small ones that went into pockets, and larger knives that went into his inventory.

The last thing he picked up, was a long thin katana and its sheath was still intact. He shook it and the ashes and other materials slid off it like Danika had slipped from the grasping aspens after using the witch's oil.

Danika assumed the pose and brought up the lens and looked at him again. Above his label was a green PVP flag, which could mean either that he had PVP turned on, or that he'd fought someone with the flag recently. Yellow meant you'd attacked someone who didn't have PVP turned on, and it stuck for 3 days. Red meant you'd killed someone who didn't have PVP turned on, or attacked someone less than half your level, and showed for a week. Anyone could attack a red marked player without triggering a PVP flag on themselves.

His label itself was the white of a friend instead of the usual NPC yellow, or player blue, and read simply, "Aishin". When she tapped it, his description read:

A Human and a Master Assassin

Karma: 3

Reincarnations: 23

Accumulated Level: 175

Aishin watched her observing him and commented lightly, "You have a pretty high level for an ordinary novice, can't decide what you want to be?"

Danika shrugged and answered calmly, "I don't intend to choose a path, I want to be free to learn whatever I want to."

His brows drew down into a frown and he asked, "Doesn't that mean you can only learn from a few NPCs that can teach skills like the sages?"

She regarded him with raised eyebrows and said, "I have a skill that lets me learn a new skill by observing it. Although I was warned that at low levels it might take a thousand repetitions, I've been really lucky, I've already learned two skills from the first demonstration."

"In the vale right? All the mentors have a sage's teaching skill. Which one taught the skill that lets you learn by observing?" Aishin asked curiously.

"The smith," Danika answered readily, and added, "and then when I left the vale, the traveling merchant taught me a skill that should let me teach skills to others."

"You're a freaking sage," Aishin said with shock.

Danika laughed and activated her wings. She flew toward the edge of the meadow while asking lightly, "A baby sage? It still says I'm a novice and I haven't even finished my growth phase."

"We should go down the other side of the mountain," Aishin told her. "That's the

direction they went."

Danika looked back at him and said dryly, "But I need to take these seeds back to the witch." She took a deep breath before asking cautiously, "What did you do to them?"

Aishin shrugged and replied matter of factly, "I carried out a contract on their guild."

After a long moment, Danika asked, "Is it a small guild?"

"Only about 50 members, but only about 10 of them were any trouble, the rest were all below Master," Aishin answered calmly.

"You killed them all?" Danika verified.

"Yeah," he replied simply.

"No wonder they're mad," she muttered.

Aishin laughed and said, "No, that's not why they're hunting me. It's because their guild leader had just been slain by a boss, and didn't have enough Karma to resurrect. Like that's my fault."

### ***31: The Descent***

Danika looked back at him and pointed out, "You can see how much Karma a player has."

Aishin tossed a wink at her and replied, "I can see more than that. Still not my fault he couldn't revive, if someone goes hunting dangerous creatures in the middle of a war, they should accept the risks."

"How many times have they killed you?" Danika questioned.

Aishin apparently tapped a string of emotes because his face writhed through a series of grimaces, and then he said, "Three, they've been really persistent. This time they hired a wizard, they don't have anyone that powerful in the guild."

"Why aren't they going after the person who gave you the contract instead?" she wondered.

He laughed and replied, "I'm pretty sure they have no idea who that was."

"Shouldn't it be the opposing guild?" Danika asked.

"It's more complicated than that, it's a war between two small countries bordering the dwarven mountains. Dozens of guilds have been employed on both sides," he explained.

"Oh," she replied, "who hired you then?"

"Secret," he said.

Danika shrugged and then asked, "Since they think they finally forced you to start over, shouldn't it be okay for you to help me get back down to the witch, as long as you stay away from the wizard's tower?"

Aishin questioned neutrally, "How were you going to get back if I weren't here?"

Danika turned and flew back to him before answering, and then she said seriously, "I won't demand that you help me. But before this, I still had some oil left to escape the aspens if I got caught again, and plenty of Karma to pay for a restore or to revive.

"Ah," he said ruefully, "if I hadn't tried to save you, and you'd had to revive instead, it would have cost you less and you'd already be back safely in the nearest of the Twin's shrines. Sorry."

Danika eyed him and asked, "What would you have done then with no one to remove the dagger?"

He shrugged and looked around before answering, "Risked a random teleport instead of the dagger. But I might have died, that was a huge meteor shower and it's only 12 meters."

"Oh," she said.

He told her, "I'll help, but I've only got about 20 minutes left."

"Oh, it took me hours to get up here," Danika replied a bit glumly.

Aishin strode to the edge of the meadow and asked, "That little town with the tree in the middle, right?"

She nodded.

"It won't take hours, but you'll have to stay close," he demanded.

"Ok," she agreed.

He jumped off the edge.

Danika gasped, and then zipped after him. He tossed something at his own feet and bounced off it, she slowed just long enough to see that it was a throwing star half embedded in the rock, and then dove after him. He used up three more before the slope gentled, but he barely slowed as his last bounce shifted him into a downhill trot.

A couple of minutes later they zoomed past one of the landmarks that the witch had said bordered the silver wolverine's territory. Danika called out, "Wait!"

Aishin paused just long enough to reach out and catch her as she got close enough, and then resumed the reckless pace downward. "Too fast?" he questioned.

Danika squeaked, and babbled quickly, "No, no this is the silver wolverine's territory!"

He chuckled and replied, "It will live longer if we don't see it."

A few minutes later they slid down a shale covered slope into the grasping aspens. The trees reached for them, but Aishin simply pulled his sword with his other hand and sliced off any branch that moved close enough.

The forest below the aspens actually made him slow down at last, as the trees moved closer together and became larger and sturdier. Danika told him, "You can let go of me. The frogs in the swamp below are the last big hazard." She wondered if they really posed any danger to him though.

"Swamp?" Aishin questioned worriedly as he released her. "How deep?" He didn't stop moving, as he darted nimbly between trees and over overgrown patches of undergrowth.

Danika had no answer for him and admitted, "I have no idea, I flew."

"Can we go around it?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, I don't know," she replied apologetically.

"Damn," he cursed.

When they reached the edge of the dark still water, Aishen finally slid to a halt and gazed out across the swamp. In the distance a frog snatched one of the large butterflies out

of the air with its incredibly long tongue and swallowed it.

After a moment Aishen commented, "This must have been really dangerous for you, but it doesn't look too bad," and stepped forward into the water.

Danika flicked up her menu and cast her invisibility before following, as he waded through the shallow water stirring up obscuring clouds of muck with every step. When her invisibility gave out, she landed on his shoulder. He stepped up onto a hummock of vegetation, and leapt for another ahead.

For a few moments they made quick progress, and then they came to the edge of one of the wider pools covered in lilies. Aishen only hesitated a moment before stepping into it and wading forward. His progress slowed after only a few steps.

"What's wrong?" Danika asked from beside his ear.

"The lilies are tangling my feet I think, it's getting harder to move with each step," he replied.

Danika launched herself from his shoulder and observed him for a moment. He took another step forward and the lilies around him bobbed and were pulled forward with him. They didn't seem to be trying to grasp him as the aspens had, there just seemed to be so many of them that they were matted together.

"Can you cut a path through?" she suggested.

He pulled his sword again and stabbed down before sweeping it forward. The lilies trembled and a large leaf directly in his path split neatly in half like something out of an old martial arts film, as his sword lifted out of the water.

He stepped forward again, more quickly, and nodded. The water rose deeper around his thighs as he progressed, until he was waist deep. He glanced back at her and exclaimed suddenly, "Frog!"

Danika zipped upward at the same time as she belatedly recast her invisibility. She felt the movement of the air as the tongue snapped at the spot she'd been a split second before.

There was no time to recover before Aishen took another step forward, and then vanished suddenly as something pulled him beneath the surface. Danika panicked. She threw her light cantrip after him into the water, and caught only a flicker of movement ahead of where he'd been.

The soft chime of a skill level rang unnoticed as she zipped forward and cast it again. This time she found him, a faint figure being dragged by some huge dark creature surprisingly deep below the surface. She threw her next light into the water toward him again the moment it faded, and then was yanked backward out of the air.

Her invisibility had ended, and a large frog had snapped her up. Before a single heartbeat had elapsed, she was swallowed. It was the slime all over again, only it was dark and her skin burned. Danika sliced forward with her claws and her windblade skill.

The frog wasn't like a slime with only a single skin between her and the water, the soft



glow of her own dazzle showed the wound in its stomach bleeding through the murky liquid. Danika kicked forward and pulled herself into the wound with her dragon strength. She made another cut ahead of herself, and thrust deeper into the spongy flesh. The third slice brought her out of the frog and into the dark water.

She cast her light and tried to orient herself, and a human hand grabbed her and lifted her from the water.

Danika gasped in long breaths of air while Aishin, who was soaking wet and streaked in mud and blood, said rapidly, "I'm sorry, I have to log out while we're out of combat. I'll do my best to come back for you in six hours."

He released her. Her wings activated automatically before she fell, and he vanished.

Danika cast her invisibility and glanced around frantically. A few meters away, an enormous shell bobbed to the surface.

## 32: Frog Soup

A dragonfly buzzed past her face, and Danika blinked and shivered. The shiver alerted her and she flicked up her character sheet. Her health and energy were both low, although not currently dropping, so after a moment she followed Aishin's example and logged out so that ZipZing could rest safely.

Danika stared at the warning label in front of her nose and tried to calculate how long it would be until her kitten and dragon sticker arrived. About four days, she decided as she unhooked the VR-medi pod connections.

She pulled herself over the edge and dropped to the floor. Her little apartment was quiet. Outside a few lazy clouds drifted high in an afternoon sky. Her stomach grumbled, and she laughed.

--

A few hours later Danika was buried in the forums, reading about the adventures posted by "The First Dwarven Smith". According to him (or her) there were still only two dwarven players in the game so far. She'd been led to their recent adventures by posts about the two kingdom war going on along the edge of the dwarven mountain range.

The thing that had surprised her most was that the war Aishin had spoken of was practically on the other side of the "Living Jade Empire". He really had traveled quite far and many strange coincidences must have occurred for Justin to have been hired to destroy him, at the same time that he'd met ZipZing on the mountain.

The dwarven mountains bordered the great desert that lay at the edge of the southwestern portion of the map. and Oliva, where Justin's tower was, turned out to be sort of midway between the center and the bulk of the dragon mountains in the east. That vast range stuck out a curving tail which divided the elven territories in the northeast from the human territory in the center of the empire.

The north was crowned by an icy ocean that spread down the northwest edge to meet the desert. The south held volcanoes that gave way in the southeast to tractless jungle.

Players reported that all the border territories were untraversable, and that you'd soon find yourself heading back toward the center. Danika decided that the map edges likely worked in the same fashion that the fog beyond the rim of the beginner's vale had.

Danika had her phone propped up beside her screen as she read. It displayed the first layer of the "Living Jade Empire" interface with her short friend list, empty message queue, quest status, and current time. Her ongoing quests were only "Growth Phase" and "Moonflower Seeds".

A friend online notification chimed quietly. Danika blinked and glanced at the time. It hadn't quite been six hours yet, but she shut everything down and hurried back into the VR-medi pod to meet Aishin.

--

She waited impatiently for the game to complete the connection before she finally

returned to the swamp. A rotting smell wafted into her face on the warm damp air, and with it came an invitation to join Aishin's party. She cast her invisibility first, having learned from her earlier mistake. Behind her Aishen called out, "ZipZing!?"

Danika turned toward him, to see that he had a frog in one hand and a small knife in the other. With surprising speed he deftly sliced the frog open, shook it briefly, and then tossed it aside. Half a dozen split frogs already bobbed around him like horrible peas in a sludgy soup. He glanced around and then spotted another frog. He pounced toward it like a cat and repeated the strange performance.

Danika quickly tapped accept on the party invitation and Aishin exclaimed, "Finally! Hold on ZipZing, I'll definitely find you now!"

A moment later, his menus popped up faintly in front of him, and then he turned toward her. He moved accurately in her direction, lifted his sword again, and sliced forward as Danika hovered in a state of wordless shock.

Aishin bent forward and lifted a frog that had been unseen beneath her, pulled it open and shook it. His face was expressionless, but his voice was worried as he called out again, "Drat, where are you ZipZing?"

She found her voice and replied quickly, "I'm right here."

He spun in place. "I don't see you," he protested.

Her spell timed out and she explained as she appeared in front of him, "I have 5 seconds of invisibility."

Aishin snatched her out of the air and held her in front of his face before asking rapidly, "Why didn't you tell me that before? Why didn't you answer earlier? I was so worried when it said you came online but you wouldn't answer! At first I thought you must have gone on without me earlier, but the friend list still gave your location as 'the frog swamp' and I couldn't see your exact location until you finally joined the party!"

Danika blinked and said, "I just got here, and I accepted your party invite right away."

Aishin refuted her claim, "It said you arrived several minutes ago."

Danika shook her head and told him, "I didn't actually, because it took a long time to complete the connection."

He flicked a string of exasperated emotes at her, making his expression scrunch repeatedly.

Danika giggled.

Aishin looked around again and laughed ruefully. "Poor frogs," he said, "I should have sent the party invite before we left the flower field."

Danika followed his gaze and then asked incredulously, "Were you cutting open frogs looking for me?"

"Yeah," he admitted.

Danika snickered and after a moment Aishin laughed. In a moment they were both laughing.

She suggested with a giggle, "At least we can collect some frogs teeth?"

His startled reaction only made her laugh harder. "Seriously?" he questioned.

"Yes!" Danika wheezed.

After the laughter died down Aishin said, "Ok, frogs teeth." He placed her on his shoulder, picked up the last frog he'd discarded, and examined it. After a moment he snickered and told her, "You weren't joking, it really has got little teeth."

Danika grinned at him and admitted, "I thought the toad was joking about frogs teeth too, until the traveling merchant told me that they're valuable local resources."

Aishin carefully collected all of the small conical teeth from each of the slain frogs, and then gave her half of them.

Danika protested, "I didn't kill any of them."

Aishin corrected her, "You killed that fat one there, that isn't split open and just has a hole in it. Besides," he added, "they were all killed on your behalf so you might as well have some benefit."

Danika giggled.

Aishin protested, "I know, but it seemed so reasonable, since it said you were here somewhere but you wouldn't or couldn't answer. I wasted a lot of energy on speed though, so now we'll have to wait awhile for my energy to replenish a bit."

Danika tapped her storage ring and pulled out her food storage pouch. All that was left were the two apples, she hesitated a moment and then pulled out the bright red one Justin had given her. "Here," she said, "but be careful, it might be poisoned after all."

Aishin turned his head and took the apple, then flicked a raised eyebrow at her. He opened his menu back up before taking a bite. Even from his shoulder Danika still couldn't see the content of his screens.

After a moment he said, "Wow! Where did you get this? It's not poisoned, it's at least a third level restoration." He held the apple back up to her, despite the bite taken from it, and said, "You should keep the rest, it probably has two more restores in it before it becomes a plain apple again."

Danika put the apple away before answering a little nervously, "The wizard who almost killed us threw it at me."

Aishin misunderstood and said, "Oh. I couldn't see anything outside my original perspective while I was stoned."

Danika opened her mouth to explain, but then caught sight of the enormous rotting turtle corpse that still bobbed against the edge of the lily covered water just beyond where

Aishin stood. "Ew," she said instead.

Aishin turned to follow her gaze and laughed again. "Actually," he said, "I was thinking I should remove the shell, and pole it like a raft the rest of the way across the swamp."

Danika shuddered. "You can't smell it," she stated flatly.

Aishin gave her a quick grin and agreed, "I can't, which I take it, is the advantage of not having VR. I can imagine how it must smell after floating dead for a full day and night."

### ***33: The Temptation of Reward***

Danika looked at Aishin and wondered why, if he had enough money to waste it on a licensed avatar, he didn't have VR. "You only play from your phone?" she asked a little doubtfully.

"No," he replied easily, "when I'm home I have a full motion console."

Danika frowned at him and asked, "Shouldn't that have a voice connection."

"It does," he agreed, and then laughed and added, "but I keep it muted most of the time." Aishin said seriously as he dismantled the turtle, "You saved me with your light back then you know. It made it so I could see the gleam of its eyes, and kill it before it drowned me."

"How did you know which frog had swallowed me then?" Danika questioned curiously.

"I didn't," Aishin explained. "When I surfaced I couldn't see you anywhere, until a light popped out of that fat frog's belly. It's a good thing that your wings glow," he informed her.

"I like them," Danika replied a bit smugly, and he laughed.

--

Aishin logged out again when they reached Oliva. Danika continued into the little town, zipping straight for the witch's house.

Evening was approaching, but when Danika knocked at her window the little old woman still stood at her accustomed place beside her tiny brazier. Her enormous hat tilted as she called out cheerfully, "Welcome back ZipZing, how did it go?"

Danika replied a little sadly, "I got quite a few seed pods, but the meadow burned."

The hat bobbed as the witch nodded. "It's good that you made it in time," she said cheerfully. She didn't seem surprised by the news. She told her spoon, "Keep stirring for awhile," and stepped away from the brazier to take the seed pouch when Danika held it out to her.

The spoon obediently continued stirring, and Danika waited patiently as the witch collected a pretty blue jar with a crescent moon motif. The witch carefully removed the seed pods one by one and counted them into the jar until she'd reached 200. Then she closed the bag, smiled, and told Danika, "You did very well ZipZing, what do you wish as a reward?"

Danika considered various ideas, such as the other cantrip she needed in order to learn illusion. The witch waited patiently. Finally Danika decided, "I told you I'd do you a favor for hiding in your shelves, I'd like you to consider this that favor."

The witch tilted her head back until the hat brim rose far enough that Danika could see her eyes sparkling as she replied, "Oh very wise. You're right to think that owing a witch a favor can be dangerous."

Danika hovered a little nervously, uncertain how to reply, when Arthur spoke up from the floor beneath the low table that the little brazier and its pot rested upon. "Of course a student of mine would have to be at least that bright," he grumbled.

The witch chuckled and told Arthur, "But you know that the silver wolverine reported that she even replanted the moonflowers before leaving."

"Busybody," Arthur declared, without specifying whether he was referring to the wolverine or to ZipZing.

The witch held the seed pouch out to Danika and declared cheerfully, "Then take this as a gift for saving me a trip up the mountain. It will hold an unlimited amount of any one thing."

Danika accepted the pouch back and said politely, "Thank you, I'm sure it will be very useful."

"Indeed it will," the witch agreed knowingly. "Good luck in your adventures ZipZing, I won't have anything more for you to do for quite some time."

"Oh," Danika replied.

Arthur added helpfully, "She means until you're at least proficient, silly pathless butterfly lizard novice."

--

While Danika was working the next day, she looked up apples and wizards in "Living Jade Empire" and discovered that wizards, or rather enchanters really did have a thing for apples. Most wizards learned the apple spell if they could.

Danika added it to the list of things she wanted to learn too. Apples could be enchanted to either heal or poison with only an apple and the caster's Karma. They did not have an instant effect like her prayer, but used much less Karma.

When she returned to "Living Jade Empire" that night, it was just after dawn in the game. Danika zipped around the village and accosted every NPC she could find to ask if they had any tasks, but they all said the same thing, that their tasks were not suitable for a novice.

She had been avoiding the olive tree and Justin's tower, but when she finally approached the small shale hill, the traveling merchant was waiting beneath the tree. He was playing an older game's theme song on a slide whistle.

He greeted her as cheerfully as usual when he'd finished. "ZipZing! Are you busy with anything at the moment?"

Danika grinned. "No," she replied quickly.

"If you wouldn't mind, I've got an order for 10,000 acorns. There's a large forest where oaks are the dominant tree to the west of here, but there aren't many people who are capable of collecting acorns in the spring," the merchant explained.

She hesitated. She'd been looking for a quest, but 10,000 acorns was a daunting number if she had to encourage each one to grow individually. She looked up at the olive tree. She'd only collected a total of about 500 olives for the witch.

"How long would I have to complete it?" Danika asked cautiously. She would still be working every day for the next eight days (4 weeks in the game).

"Three weeks," the traveling merchant replied cheerfully. Danika was already shaking her head when he added, "But instead of coin, I could give you a ring that can teach you the cantrip 'spark'."

Danika gulped. It was the magical path equivalent of the fire starting skill she'd intended to learn from the baker in the beginner's vale. Slowly her head nodded almost without her conscious intent.



### **34: 10,000 Nuts**

The merchant laughed and asked, "We have a deal then?"

"Yeah," Danika agreed.

He adjusted his pack and said, "Then let's set off right away, time waits for no man or fairy dragon." He turned and strode quickly away from the olive tree.

She blinked and then zipped after him.

--

The merchant left her in the oak riddled forest a couple of hours later with the parting words, "I'll return to check on your progress every few days ZipZing. Good luck!"

The afternoon sun shone brightly, and cute little forest birds hopped and fluttered about on their personal tasks, with a variety of cheerful noises. Danika pulled out the pouch the witch had returned to her and peeked inside. There were still 3 moonflower seed pods laying in the bottom.

She moved the seed pods into her food pouch, where each one took up an entire inventory slot. But after preparing her inventory and casting her first plant growth, she discovered that it would be a while before the acorns were actually ready to harvest. She could currently only bring one to  $\frac{2}{3}$  of maturity.

Thankfully food was abundant in this forest. Spring strawberries colonized the forest floor along with other edible plants that her identify skill showed her. Since she could keep her energy replenishing, she stored the pouch and simply concentrated on casting growth at as many acorn buds as she could as quickly as possible.

Her growth spell soon leveled up again and the acorns were catapulted to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way to maturity instead. The activity soon became an endless grind despite the beautiful scenery, and Danika wasn't regretful when the sandman twinkled into existence before her. She'd slowed down for a moment and fallen asleep with a half eaten strawberry clutched in one claw.

--

In the morning Danika pulled herself heavily out of the VR-medi pod when her alarm woke her. She fumbled through her morning routine with her eyes half-closed. Fortunately there was nothing complicated during the first hour of her shift.

By the time she had worked her way through one particularly tricky section later in the morning she was ready to open "Living Jade Empire" on her phone and continue casting at acorns on the side.

She was surprised to find that her Growth Phase quest had completed while she slept. It didn't reward her as generously as hatching had. It only gave her 10 additional Karma, but she was still pleased.

Her avatar on her phone didn't appear noticeably different, but she found herself

looking forward to being able to log back into the VR version of the game that night and see what had changed.

Danika wondered suddenly how Aishin had guessed that she was a little plump and had green eyes from such a simple representation. Curiously, she zoomed her view in on herself. ZipZing's eyes in this form were more green than her own, but she had to admit that the plump cheeks and green eyes did make the little dragon face resemble her own, a bit.

She continued her work with her phone in her lap, casting at acorns every time she had a spare moment. Aishin logged in for a little while during the afternoon, and after dithering for a moment, she sent him a brief, "hi."

It was her first time using the in-game messaging system, and Danika laughed when the animation showed a small grey bird swooping in on ZipZing and flying away with a scrap of parchment in its claws.

Aishin's reply arrived a moment later, held in the toes of a small bat. It said simply: "Hey."

There was no further communication between them, but Aishin hadn't disbanded the party, and while he was online Danika could see his status bars and a compass that showed his direction from her.

--

Danika estimated that she'd probably only cast at around 1,200 acorns by the time her shift ended. She hadn't been counting them individually, but she doubted that her estimate was very far off. However, she had no idea how many she'd cast growth on the night before, so when she reconnected through the VR-medi pod, she took a few minutes zipping around the surprisingly large patch of forest with partially matured acorns visibly dangling on the branches.

Danika was surprised to find that she'd already cast her spell on around a hundred trees worth of acorns, which meant that at about 60 acorns per large tree, she was already a bit over halfway through preparing 10,000 acorns. She felt more optimistic about being able to complete the quest within the next five days.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to examine ZipZing's matured appearance in her VR form other than by craning her head around to look at her own wings and examining her claws. From those portions of herself, she decided that she probably looked exactly as she had in the beginner's vale.

Danika worked busily. Every few minutes she dropped to the forest floor and scrounged for food, and then resumed her progress. The raw berries and edible leaves didn't boost her energy as much as the prepared foods had, but since they were freely available she was able to alternate between eating and casting and make steady progress.

Everything was going well, when she came face to face with her first squirrel.

Danika froze when the branch quivered beneath the impact of the squirrel's landing. It landed on the branch inches from where she hovered over her most recent acorn target. The squirrel glanced at her and then examined the acorn she'd just cast growth at closely.

Danika started to back away, and the squirrel's head snapped up and it bared its teeth at her. It made a sort of chattering noise. She looked around nervously, to find that there were dozens of large red-brown squirrels with fluffy ear tips visible in the trees she'd visited earlier.

"Shoo," she said experimentally, and waved her claws toward it.

The squirrel gave her a look of disgust.

### ***35: Redheads Have A Reputation***

Danika pulled up her lens from the menus and targeted the squirrel.

"Red Squirrel: Level 28, Health Excellent," read its label. She tapped for its details and read: "This arboreal rodent is one of the more dominant members of the local population. Identification: omnivorous, but prefers tree nuts. Long tail helps balance when jumping. Sharp curved claws for climbing."

Danika eyed the squirrel worriedly, but it didn't do anything besides sit there staring at her. She flew forward to the next acorn bud, and cast her spell again. The squirrel followed, and stopped to examine the newly plump young acorn.

After a few more, Danika resumed her routine of eating and casting. She kept a close watch on the squirrels, but they weren't gathering the young acorns up. They just seemed to be very interested.

Danika watched one squirrel drop to the forest floor and snatch a strawberry, like she was doing. It carried the berry back up to a high branch before stopping to eat it in small quick bites.

Night was falling when the traveling merchant found her. She told him worriedly, "I think the squirrels are waiting for the acorns to be ripe."

The merchant looked around and agreed, "Possibly so, although acorns aren't their favorite nuts."

"They aren't?" Danika asked questioningly.

"Not for red squirrels at least," the merchant clarified. He added helpfully, "They usually sleep during the middle of the day, perhaps you could do your harvesting then?"

"Oh," she replied thoughtfully.

He examined several of the trees she'd cast her spell in and shook his head. "These that were only advanced  $\frac{2}{3}$  toward maturity won't be ripe in time, and by the day after tomorrow the next ones at  $\frac{3}{4}$  won't have enough time either." He glanced around and said without any hesitation, "You'll need 28 more trees full plus whatever the squirrels take."

"Oh," she replied glumly.

The merchant cast an amused look at her. "You're close to finished speeding up their growth, don't forget to rest up for the week in between so that you've got plenty of energy for collecting them," he advised. As he set off into the twilight he raised his hand in farewell.

Danika activated her dazzle and kept casting throughout the game's night. It was just past dawn when she finished the 28th tree worth of acorns since the merchant had departed. She thought of the squirrels and kept casting until the alarm that she'd set told her that it was past time to be sleeping.

Danika's next shift kept her too busy to play on her phone at the same time. It was already too late to cast her growth spell on any more acorns and have them finished in time anyway.

She was glad to have consistent work for awhile, but... it really gave her the same feeling that grinding points in some really repetitive games had in the past. Unendurable repetition. When her shift finally ended she flopped back on the floor and laid there staring up at her ceiling.

She fell asleep.

When she woke up in the middle of the night, she was stiff, sore, and hungry. By the time she'd heated up water to make a quick packet of ramen, eaten it, and heaved herself over the edge of the VR-medi pod, she was entirely too awake.

Danika logged in, to find the sun shining overhead and not a squirrel in sight. A butterfly brushed past her to visit a blossom that snuggled among dozens of its siblings along the branches of a fruit tree. The tree stood in a bit of meadow beyond the last oak tree that Danika had been encouraging acorns in.

A little bat darted out of the forest shadows into the sunlight and dropped a message in front of her nose. Danika flicked her claws out and caught it. It was a message from Aishin that read: "You're on late?"

Danika assumed the pose and tapped her friend list up. It said his location was near Elmsbrook. Aishin still hadn't disbanded the party, and the compass now indicated that he was to the west of her. She was pretty sure that the human capital was in that direction.

She wrote a quick reply: "Couldn't go back to sleep. You?" The same little grey bird that had carried it before flitted off with her message as soon as she hit send.

The bat returned a moment later: "Up early but have time to waste in transit."

Danika replied with a question: "You're headed toward the human capital?"

When the little bird flew out again, a voice below said nonchalantly, "It's really too bad that messenger birds aren't edible."

Danika jumped, which disrupted her wings and she dropped toward the voice. She recovered and zipped upward just before the jaws snapped on air. She squeaked and zipped higher, before looking down at the red fox who was obviously laughing at her.

"How amusing," it said with a foxy grin.

"You can talk," Danika said with astonishment.

"So can you," the fox pointed out dryly, "but don't expect me to get all excited about it."

The bat returned again, struggling a little, as it dropped a larger message into her hands: "Yeah, need to restock. Do you want me to come back and bring you with me? I didn't think about it, but the area closer to the capital would be a lot safer for a novice."

Danika replied quickly: "Thanks, but I'm in the middle of a three week (game time)

quest."

The bat zipped back with a tiny message: "Ok."

Danika closed her message menu and then flicked over to her lens.

The fox asked with apparent interest, "Not going to send them the bird again?"

She rolled her eyes at it and saw that through her lens it said: "Red Fox: Level 126, Health Excellent." It was more than three times her own accumulated level. A bit nervously she replied, "No. Can the squirrels talk?"

"I doubt any of those idiots can live long enough to learn to talk," the fox replied sourly. "But at least they're pretty tasty," it added more cheerfully.

"You only have one tail?" Danika questioned curiously.

The fox glared at her and pointed out, "So do you, but did I comment on it?"

### ***36: Transient Spring***

Danika explained quickly, "No, I just thought magical foxes had at least two tails."

The fox sniffed and asked, "How old are you trying to say that I look?"

Danika blinked. She tapped on the fox's description, which told her: "This aged vixen is a skilled hunter. Identification: red fox, the largest of the true foxes. Omnivorous. Winter coat is especially dense and soft. Known for trickery and cunning."

Danika replied hesitantly, "Um, fully mature?"

"Well of course, I haven't been a kit in ages," the fox agreed dryly. She added, "But I'm not old enough to have two tails."

"How old would that be?" Danika asked curiously.

"Over a hundred years!" the fox exclaimed.

"Ah," Danika replied, and a silence fell between them.

"Are you planning to just hover there all day?" the fox questioned after awhile.

Danika looked around and then shrugged. "It's not a bad place to hover." The little meadow with its fruit tree looked peaceful in the sun. "I should probably go sleep soon though," she added.

The fox asked with scorn, "What are you learning to keep a squirrel's schedule, sleeping midday?"

"What is it that you think I should be doing?" Danika asked with amusement.

"I'm glad you asked," replied the fox triumphantly. "Apart from the obvious, I could use the assistance of someone with wings today."

"In doing what?" Danika asked cautiously.

"Getting a drink of water," the fox replied with a sly smile.

Danika narrowed her eyes and asked suspiciously, "Why do you need someone with wings to get water?"

"Because it only fountains out for a moment each day at the top of a magical stone tower," the fox informed her, "and it's always absorbed by greedy plants and creatures before it can trickle all the way to the ground."

Danika gazed at the greedy fox. The fox smiled at her. "What do I get if I do fetch this rare water for you?" Danika questioned.

"I won't eat you," the fox replied with wide eyes.

Danika huffed a laugh and told the fox, "No."

The fox narrowed her eyes and asked, "What do you want then?"

Danika replied promptly, "Someone to keep the squirrels from collecting the acorns I need as soon as they ripen."

"Both squirrels and acorns tend to be found in the tops of trees," the fox pointed out dryly, "while foxes run best on the ground. If I could climb like a squirrel, I wouldn't need a winged assistant to get a drink."

Danika asked with feigned innocence, "But aren't foxes known for their brilliantly cunning plans? I only need to have the acorns protected for a few days."

The fox's bushy tail traced a wavering path through the air before she replied again. "I might be able to think of a few tactics," she admitted, "but I certainly couldn't promise that the squirrels wouldn't get some of the acorns."

"I can't guarantee I'll get as much of that water as you want either," Danika pointed out logically.

The fox laughed silently at her. "I can say with certainty that you won't be able to fetch that much of it," she stated. The fox turned away from Danika and flicked her tail. "Let's get going then, time never stands still," she barked as she trotted across the meadow.

Danika followed. As they traveled deeper into the woods the trees grew taller and closer together, and she began to wonder if she was going to have trouble finding her way back to the acorn laden trees she'd worked so hard on.

The fox trotted quickly while describing the task ahead. "The water will only fountain for a minute, so you'll need to catch as much as you can before it falls to the ground. There's a lot of competition, but no one has time to eat anyone else while the water is falling. The moment it stops though, all bets are off, so fly away as quickly as you can with whatever you've collected."

Danika asked curiously a little later, "What's the usual thing that you thought I should be doing?"

The fox grinned and replied with amusement, "Providing nourishment."

"I'm probably not very tasty," Danika retorted.

"Who knows," the fox asked, "but wouldn't it benefit both of us if a few squirrels happened to fall out of the trees at an opportune moment?"

Danika didn't reply. It was probably true, but it sounded like a horrible thing to admit.

They zipped past hidden springs that steamed among tall stands of ferns, as the woods became darker. Mosses began to colonize the towering trees, showing that even the air was wetter. The fox dove beneath a tangled knot of brambles and broad leafed plants, calling out, "Just a bit farther."

Danika veered away from the dark passage and zipped up and over the tangled vegetation. The fox stood among the crowded leaves at the base of a large stone cone that



looked curiously slick. Danika asked uncertainly, "Is this the magical stone tower?"

"Obviously," the fox replied.

Other animals were pushing their way through the dense greenery. There were deer, rabbits, opossums, and elk. There were also two wolves and a large cat that yawned and showed fangs as long as ZipZing was tall. Birds of many varieties were crowding the nearby branches. Danika flinched away from the sharp talons of an owl that fluttered past and shoved several smaller birds off of a branch as it landed.

"Any moment now," warned the fox.

Danika pulled out the embroidered bag of holding that could hold an unlimited amount of any one thing, and watched the top of the cone intently, like all of the animals around her were already doing.

There was a sort of coughing popping noise a moment before the geyser erupted. Danika darted forward with the rest, dodging over the ears of the large cat where it scabbled for purchase, and under the talons of the owl, as she shoved the bag into the spray of water. It burned her wherever it touched her skin, but she grimly held on despite the pain as it felt like her claws were boiled. It's just a game, she reminded herself, you can recover from anything that doesn't kill you. The instant the flow of water began to falter, Danika zipped away from the geyser and back into the forest in the direction they'd come from.

The fox bounded after her, but when ZipZing never slowed she shouted breathlessly, "Hey this is far enough!"

Danika slowed and then landed on a branch. She tucked the pouch into her inventory, to the fox's dismay, and pulled out Justin's apple. Danika took a large bite, and stored the rest again before speaking. "No," she told the fox as her hands began to heal, "I'll pour the water out for you when we reach the place where we met."

"You weren't heading in the right direction anymore then," the fox complained.

"You can lead," Danika agreed.

She followed the fox back out of the deep wood, to the little meadow with the little fruit tree and the acorn laden oaks at its edge. When they arrived the fox turned and snapped, "Well?"

### ***37: A Bit of Tail***

Danika looked around and then asked the fox, "What do you want to use as a bowl?"

The fox gazed up at her with a startled expression and asked, "Do you think you really got more than this leaf," she pointed with her nose, "will hold?"

Danika nodded.

The fox said, "Wait here a moment," and darted back into the woods. A few minutes later she reappeared carrying a large mushroom cap delicately in her jaws. She set the cap down and bit small neat bites into it until it was mostly hollowed out, and then looked up at ZipZing expectantly.

Danika asked cautiously, "You promise not to try to eat me, and to try to prevent the squirrels from harvesting acorns until I collect them next week?" In all the stories she could think of, foxes sometimes played some really cruel tricks, but they didn't actually lie.

The fox bobbed its head and said, "If you can fill this mushroom cup with the water, you have my word."

Danika kept one eye on the fox as she dropped to the ground beside the mushroom cap. She carefully lifted the bag, and poured. She wasn't certain she'd gotten enough water to fill the mushroom, but the water continued to pour until the cap was brimming full. Danika shut the bag, flicked it back into her inventory, and zipped upward with relief.

The fox lapped up the water greedily at first, and then carefully, scraping every drop from the cup with her tongue. She looked up at Danika and asked, "There's more in your bag isn't there?"

"I think so," Danika agreed.

The fox wheedled, "If I give you something valuable, will you pour out the rest for me to drink?"

"Ok," Danika agreed. She dropped back to the ground and poured out the rest of the geyser's water. The mushroom cap was only about half full.

The fox made no complaint, and simply lapped up the rest of the water, and then ate the rest of the mushroom cap. Then she turned and nipped at her own tail until a small tuft of hair with a spiny looking seed dropped out. "Take this in return with my thanks," the fox declared.

Danika picked up the hair entangled seed doubtfully. Her plant identification said that the seed was a Black Datura seed, and gave warnings of poison and hallucinations. After a minute, she stored it carefully beside the three moonflower seed pods.

Danika activated her wings and returned to the air. Looking down at the fox, she thought she seemed somehow smaller and softer looking than she had before. She brought up her lens, and saw that the fox's description had changed. It now began: "This young vixen is a skilled hunter."

Danika's morning alarm popped up a notification window informing her that she'd stayed up playing for the rest of the night. She informed the fox, "I'll be back in a couple of days," and disconnected from the game.

--

Danika had just finished eating breakfast when the access bell of her apartment chimed. She scooted over to the door and opened it cautiously. It was a delivery person, who handed her a sturdy oversized envelope. Danika grinned happily as she said, "Thanks! I've been waiting for this!"

She opened the envelope and admired the printing on the large decal sticker as she logged in for her shift. She was satisfied with the quality and it was just as cute as it had appeared, or even cuter, since she could see the details of the kitten's fur and the dragon's scales. She set it aside and worked with renewed enthusiasm.

On her first break she carefully cleaned the inside of the VR-medi pod, paying extra attention to the area around the warning stickers. On her last break she applied the cute kitten and dragon sticker over the top of the warning labels.

--

When Danika returned to "Living Jade Empire" after she finished her work that evening, the fox and the traveling merchant were talking softly together beneath the oaks. The merchant looked up and smiled as Danika approached.

"ZipZing," he called out, "you look like you're in a good mood this morning!"

The fox asked with interest, "Oh, did you catch a tasty breakfast? Is there any left?"

Danika laughed and replied to them both, "I just saw something pretty on my way here, instead of the usual annoying view."

The fox rolled her eyes and said, "I'm going to go frighten the squirrels again." She added hopefully, "Maybe one will fall out of its tree."

"Ok, thank you," Danika replied.

The merchant inquired cheerfully, "Have you obtained anything interesting lately?"

Danika nodded and showed him the spiny seed entangled in the tuft of hair that the fox had given her. The traveling merchant whistled and said, "A black moonflower seed, are you sure you want to sell this right now?" He held it up to her and added, "I'm not sure you could carry that much coin."

Danika objected, "It doesn't look anything like the moonflower seed pods."

The merchant grinned at her and replied, "They are different plants, but both produce scented trumpet shaped flowers that bloom at night, this one is quite poisonous though."

Danika took the seed back from him and stowed it again. "I'll keep it for now then," she agreed, "but will the buying price change later?"

"It might," the merchant answered cheerfully. "Market prices do vary according to supply and demand."

Danika thought of the frogs teeth in her old salt sack, and asked, "How much would I get for a frog's tooth?"

"I generally buy them for 100 coins each," the merchant informed her. "Their price has never changed much."

That meant that the pouch she'd bought in the beginner's vale was the equivalent of two teeth. Danika felt rich all of a sudden.

She sold him one of the frogs teeth and bought four large cheeses to fill the empty spaces in the bag of holding that she had been using for food before adding the seeds to it. She also bought the radish seeds she'd asked about before.

The merchant warned her, "Be careful planting things in the wild like this. Although it seems that you haven't had any trouble dealing with foxes, there are many other potentially dangerous creatures."

Danika nodded and the merchant left with a cheery wave.

She used a small stick to dig holes for her radishes along the edge of the meadow. She looked around carefully as she worked, in case something decided that she looked delicious, but she soon finished safely.

She cast her plant growth at each seed from the air. She had just finished when a creaky voice said, "Begging your pardon great seed cultivator?"

Danika spun in the air, and made two full revolutions before spotting the elderly squirrel with tattered ears and only a bit of tail left peering at her from a high branch at the edge of the meadow. "Were you speaking to me?" she asked.

The squirrel nodded. "It was a hard winter for us, and we're delighted to see you working in our territory, but... well, we've seen you talking with that sly red fox," the squirrel told her with a quaver in its creaky old voice.

### ***38: Budding Extortionist***

Danika winced as the squirrel mentioned the fox. She wondered if the fox had had anything to do with the sad state of its tail. "Yes, I've spoken with the fox?" she admitted reluctantly.

"We've recently lost several members of the community to that cunning fox," the squirrel complained. The squirrel nattered on for awhile about the previous winter and the various tricks the fox had used to catch the squirrels it had eaten recently.

Danika finally interrupted to ask hesitantly, "If I could persuade the fox to stop bothering you for awhile, would you have the authority to make the rest of the squirrels leave my acorn crop alone?" The squirrel looked at her with such a betrayed expression that she added quickly, "I only need the 10,000 acorns that should be ripe by the end of next week, I don't mind how many are taken after that."

The elderly squirrel asked sourly, "What benefit is there for us if you get the fox to leave us alone, but half of us starve after all?"

Danika thought quickly and then suggested hopefully, "What if you squirrels also assist me in my harvest next week? If you could do that then I could spend more time casting growth on more acorns." She added a bit doubtfully, "Although then not as many acorns would be available here in the fall."

The squirrel eyed her for a moment and then replied, "That's no problem, in the fall there are also hazelnuts, pine nuts, blackberries," it nattered on with its list of potential foods for awhile before finally declaring, "If you can really dissuade the fox from eating anyone else, and encourage more nuts to grow, then I will persuade the youngsters to help you harvest your 10,000 acorns!" It spoiled the effect a little by asking, "How many is that?"

Danika replied quickly, "About a hundred and seventy trees full."

"Ah," the elderly squirrel nodded wisely before asking, "how many is a hundred?"

"Lots," Danika clarified.

--

Danika caught up with the fox about midday. She'd cast her spell on more acorns as she searched, so the time hadn't been wasted.

"I see you're keeping your priorities straight and working hard on your future food supplies," the fox commented complementarily.

"Thanks," Danika replied. She hesitated a moment before saying, "And thank you for doing such an excellent job of scaring the squirrels, but now I need to ask you to leave them alone."

The fox gazed at her with astonishment, and then narrowed her eyes and questioned, "What are they bribing you with?"

Danika blushed, making the sparkles coming off her wings turn pink again, and

admitted, "The elderly squirrel I spoke with said it will convince the younger ones to help me harvest the 10,000 acorns."

"Wow, one of those silly squirrels actually lived long enough to learn to talk?" the fox questioned with amazement.

Danika nodded.

"And what will you give me to leave those squirrels alone?" the fox asked sharply. "They've been a lot easier to catch than I'd expected," she added a bit smugly.

Danika sweated a little and questioned, "I had to do a task for you to get your assistance in keeping them from taking my acorns, why do I need to give you something now to leave them alone?"

The fox grinned and replied, "It's turned out to be a fun task, and what will I do if I've promised to leave the squirrels alone, and I get hungry later?"

Danika nodded seriously and said, "I can see how thin and malnourished you seem today." When the fox glared at her, Danika laughed merrily.

The fox sniffed. "Insults won't get you anywhere good," she said darkly.

Danika asked curiously, "Can you eat nuts?"

"I can," the fox agreed warily, "but I'm no squirrel to be bribed with them."

"Even if it's the squirrels bribing you with them?" Danika questioned.

The fox gazed at Danika with surprise. "Do you really think that you could convince those silly squirrels to pay me not to eat them?"

Danika shrugged, and pulled one of the cheeses she'd bought from her inventories and dropped it beside the fox. "I can try," she replied.

The fox gazed at the cheese greedily before asking, "Are you giving this to me?"

Danika nodded and told the fox, "Yes, I'll give you this for now, to leave the squirrels alone until I'm done here."

"Alright," the fox agreed.

--

Danika found a squirrel about an hour later, and told it, "I wish to speak to your elder."

The squirrel chattered at her unintelligibly, and Danika wished that she had already learned the illusion skill and could simply show it an image of the old squirrel.

She tried saying the same thing to the next squirrel she found. That one just blinked its eyes and ignored her.

The fifth squirrel she asked nodded, and dashed off. Danika waited hopefully for a

while, and then wondered if it had really understood. Uncertainly, she decided to wait a while longer. Just when she'd decided to give up, after having cast her growth spell on all the acorn buds of that tree and the three surrounding it, the elderly squirrel showed up.

"What is that you need of me great seed cultivator?" the squirrel asked.

Danika replied seriously, "I have arranged it so that the fox won't bother you for a while, and if you squirrels keep your promise to help me harvest all of the acorns that I need at the end of next week, I will persuade it to make a bargain with you."

The elderly squirrel gazed at her with astonishment. For a moment Danika was afraid that it had forgotten about their deal. Finally the squirrel replied creakily, "Yes of course, we are all waiting for the harvest day, and if you can really convince that cunning fox to leave us alone, we'll gift you our greatest treasure."

"It's a deal," Danika agreed without asking what their treasure was. It didn't really matter what else they gave her as long as she was able to collect the acorns and get the spark cantrip from the merchant. She calculated how much time was left and decided that she had about two and  $\frac{3}{4}$  real days left before the acorns were due. She added, "The harvest will need to be done in ten days."

Night was falling and real midnight was approaching as Danika logged out.

--

For the next couple of days, Danika leisurely cast her growth spell on the acorn buds of an ever expanding territory whenever she had time to play from her phone, and in the evenings after work.

Once she had a close call when an owl almost caught her, but she'd been able to use her dragon's strength to release herself from its sharp grasp, and then cast her invisibility and escaped. She saw Aishin online several times, but they only exchanged short greetings.

Danika finished her shift and hurried into the VR-medi pod on the last day. She'd checked from her phone several times throughout the afternoon, and the squirrels had seemed to mostly be keeping their bargain. Only a few of the ripening acorns had been eaten early, but she was still nervous about whether or not she'd be able to collect the full 10,000.

Danika logged in to find herself surrounded. She blinked and stared back at the hundreds of squirrels, and gulped nervously. Her wings sparkled in orange tones.

The elderly squirrel with his bit of a tail and his tattered ears pushed his way through the crowd. "We are ready to begin the harvest oh great seed cultivator," the squirrel announced.

Danika breathed a sigh of relief and called out, "Then bring me every ripe acorn you can find until I have collected as much as I need!"

The elderly squirrel turned and chattered loudly to the crowd of squirrels, and they all scampered off in every direction. The squirrels brought Danika acorn after acorn, and all she had to do was count them as she popped them into the embroidered pouch of holding.

The witch hadn't lied, and the pouch never filled up.

When she at last stuffed the 10,000th acorn into the pouch, Danika closed it with a sigh of relief and announced, "That is enough! I have all I need, and the rest are yours."

The elderly squirrel chattered loudly and the rest of the squirrels dispersed, some of them stopping to eat the nut they had in paw at the time. Then he turned to Danika and asked, "Were you able to bargain with the fox?"

Danika nodded, and below the tree the fox spoke, startling both of them. "Indeed. And I am here to give my word if my demands are met."

The squirrel asked nervously, "What are your demands?"

Danika interrupted before the fox could answer, and gave the squirrel the bargain that she'd decided sounded fair, "You'll give the fox a cache of food at the full moon," she'd decided that that would be easier for the squirrels to understand than months, "and the fox won't eat anymore squirrels for as long as you continue the bargain."

The fox didn't argue, but she added, "If you forget even once, I may start hunting squirrels again."

"We will agree to this bargain," the elderly squirrel declared in his creaky voice. He turned and beckoned to another squirrel who brought forth a shiny blue gem which he took in his sharp claws and then turned and placed it carefully into Danika's claws.

"You must touch it and speak the first magic word to activate it, and the second magic word to deactivate it," the squirrel instructed her seriously. It folded its claws and told her, "The first magic word is 'aqua', and the second is 'desino'."

Danika asked, "It produces water?"

The elderly squirrel gazed at her with respect and replied, "It does."

"Will you be ok without it?" Danika questioned.

The squirrel nodded and replied, "Yes. It has been a great treasure, but I am very old now, and while I've been able to teach a few of the young ones to understand this speech, none of them have been able to learn to speak it yet."

"Thank you," Danika told the elderly squirrel.

He nodded, and then departed, leaping with surprising agility from branch to branch.

The fox looked up at Danika and said admiringly, "You're such an accomplished extortionist!"

Danika glanced down at the fox who'd been paid at both ends of the deal and now had a potentially lifelong arrangement for food with the squirrels, and didn't dare a reply.



### ***39: A Dangerous Spark***

The traveling merchant showed up shortly after the fox had gone about her business. Danika held out the pouch containing the 10,000 acorns and asked hopefully, "Will I be able to keep the container used to collect them all?"

The merchant grinned at her and replied, "Of course. Just give me a moment to catalog them." He pulled several baskets out of his pack, and his hands blurred as he tilted the pouch and poured a stream of acorns out, sorting them by some mysterious criteria into each of the baskets. A few short minutes later, he returned the empty embroidered pouch to Danika.

"Thank you," she replied with relief.

The merchant laughed. "No, thank you for your hard work, and here is your reward," he said cheerfully as he held out a small copper ring.

Danika dropped toward him, and took the ring from his fingers. They were warm to the touch, which seemed odd somehow. There was no reason for the game not to make NPCs just as warm as human avatars, but it felt odd for an NPC to seem so lifelike.

Danika thrust her clawed hand through the ring, but nothing happened. It didn't shrink to fit on her wrist the way her storage ring had. She looked at the merchant questioningly.

The traveling merchant returned her gaze with interest, but no apparent comprehension of her difficulty. After a moment she asked, "How do I use it?"

"Hold it up and look through it when you're ready to learn the cantrip," the merchant advised. "It will only work once, and then the ring will be consumed by the skill transfer."

"I see," Danika said with a quick nod.

She lifted the ring with both hands and stared through the empty circle. A tiny spark glimmered in the center of it, and then suddenly shot toward her face. Danika blinked instinctively, and then worried that maybe she'd missed it, but as the ring crumbled between her claws the familiar chime of a skill level rang in the distance.

The merchant winked at her when she lowered her hands and glanced toward him again. "Congratulations ZipZing," he said cheerfully. "Shall we get going?"

"What?" Danika questioned. "Where are we going? I haven't harvested all of my radishes yet."

"How long do you think it would take you to gather the rest?" the merchant inquired.

"Um, I was going to let some of the rest go to seed, which I think will happen in a couple more days," she answered uncertainly.

The merchant rummaged in his pack and then handed her a scroll. "Use this to summon me when you're ready to go," he instructed, "and I'll escort you back to the safety of the nearest village."

"Thank you," Danika replied as she took the scroll. A moment later a notification popped up, informing her that it was time to sleep. "I'll see you in a few days then, it's time for me to sleep now," Danika told the merchant.

"Rest well," he replied cheerfully as she logged out.

--

The next morning Danika ate strawberries with her toast, which was slathered in soft cheese. She acknowledged her own habit of choosing foods similar to those that she'd seen recently in her games with amusement. Then she brushed her teeth and did her exercises. The extra minutes she'd added before had become her normal routine.

The day was cloudy, but since she was staring at her screens most of the time, she didn't mind the weather. There was only one more day to go before the whole job was due, but when Danika checked the overall project status that afternoon, it was reassuringly near completion.

An email from a friend that she had met in a game some years ago distracted her for awhile. SaltySiamese wrote: "Hey, are you playing 'Living Jade Empire' yet? I've been playing it with a few RL friends. One of whom wasted 500 Karma, if you can believe it, on making his starting character a horse! That guy said it was a joke and that he'd reincarnate as a human mage after a few days, but it's been almost two months, and he still keeps saying, 'just let me finish my latest quest.' Anyway, the point is, that if you are, and you're playing your usual magician type of character, we could really really use your help! My name there is my usual nick, SaltySiamese."

Danika closed the email and focused on her job after a careless response forced her to retrace several steps, but when she had a moment, she started "Living Jade Empire" on her phone, and sent SaltySiamese a friend request. She wasn't a wizard, but at least 8 of her 22 skills were from the magical path.

Danika had already finished her shift, tucked herself back into the VR-medi pod, and begun practicing her new spark cantrip before SaltySiamese accepted her request.

A siamese cat bounded out of the forest and dropped a message without waiting for her to take it. The message flashed up onto her menu screens as though she'd accepted it. The cat gave her a look of disdain before flicking its tail and departing. Danika laughed merrily, and read the short message: "Where the heck are you? My friend list says you are 'in a forest'. And also, that you're a level 39 Fairy Dragon who's still a plain Novice?"

Danika quickly wrote a reply: "I'm west of a small town named Oliva, I'm not sure how far west, but it's still east of the human capital. I don't intend to choose a Path, but I know the cantrips for light, color, and spark. My spells are Invisibility, Featherweight, and Plant Growth. My breath skill induces exhaustion." She didn't bother to add her Restore prayer because her Karma balance was still 15 points less than her level and she really didn't want to risk it again.

She cast her spark several more times before SaltySiamese's cat messenger returned with: "Oh, I'll have to ask the others if they think your skills will be useful, I'll let you know tomorrow, OK?"

"Sure," Danika returned with her little grey default bird messenger.

Danika practiced her spark in the air above her radish patch. It was fun, especially after she discovered that she could use her color cantrip on it at the same time. She cast a few light cantrips and discovered that the same was true for light. For a while the little meadow looked like miniature fireworks were going off in the air.

Her spark had gained its third level, before Danika realized that it was dangerous. The three second duration sparks lasted long enough to reach the ground, and at first she didn't notice the way they fizzled out against the green plants below them. But eventually, one dryer patch of grasses caught fire and a real flame flickered into life.

## *40: Human Reaction*

Danika gazed at the flames with astonishment, and then dropped quickly to the ground. She used her claws to dig into the ground with her dragon strength and tossed as many little clods of earth as she could at the fire. Too many fragments of vegetation were mixed in and the amount that she was able to hold in her small claws was not enough to smother the growing flame.

After a moment she remembered the squirrel's aqua gem, and hastily tapped her storage ring and pulled out her pouch of holding. She quickly removed the shiny blue gem, before stowing the pouch again. She launched herself into the air with it, and said, "aqua."

Danika was a little disappointed when water didn't fountain from the gem and instantly drown the fire. But the water dripped between her claws in a steady trickle, and so she darted closer to the flames and tried to target the outer edges of the small fire. She circled the fire until she felt a little dizzy, although maybe that was from breathing the noxious smoke as the fire hissed and sputtered.

Eventually the fire died out and only some ash and smoke remained. Danika continued to hold the gemstone over the increasingly damp patch of burned vegetation for quite awhile, before finally telling it, "desino."

Danika returned the gem to her inventory, before looking up at the sky to see that she'd already been playing for several hours. She decided that instead of continuing to play with fire, she would harvest the plump radishes that she'd grown. She had to stand on the ground and pull each one up with her dragon strength. Then she used the stone's water to wash each one, before she stuffed them into the embroidered pouch of holding.

She left behind a handful of plants that she hoped would have gone to seed by the time she finished work the next day.

--

During her lunch break the next day, she received a long reply from SaltySiamese that read: "Sorry. I can see that you've even gained 4 levels since yesterday, and it sounds like you've been building up a pretty good stealth type character this time, but we already have a thief. Unfortunately we really need some kind of area damage for this quest. Also, we think it would take several days to meet up, because we've already traveled quite a ways south of the human capital, so everyone decided that it isn't worth it to backtrack and try to meet up with you. I'm sorry."

At first Danika felt hurt by the rejection despite the apologies, and she replied a little angrily with the first thing that popped to mind: "If you want area damage, you should talk to a wizard called Justin the Grey!" But later in the afternoon she ruefully acknowledged that most of her skills did seem to be based around evading danger, rather than causing damage.

When her shift ended, the two week long leveling of the 20 accounts was completed. She had taken one day off for the moonflower quest, but decided to give herself the next day off to play and rest.

After connecting to the game again through the VR-medi pod, the first thing Danika

did was send SaltySiamese another message: "Sorry. A more useful idea, if you have enough coin, might be to buy scrolls or artifacts that would produce area damage. I haven't seen any yet, but I think the existence of enchanted items and scrolls that can summon NPCs should mean that such things exist?"

SaltySiamese's messenger cat returned a few minutes later to find Danika hovering over the place she'd left her seed radishes growing. The message read: "No need! Your first suggestion was great! Thanks so much! He accepted my friend request right away even though my level is so much lower, and agreed to help us! He even said he should catch up to us before midnight!"

Danika wished that she could throw the message, and dismissed it instead with an angry tap. She couldn't even explain why she felt so upset. SaltySiamese had at least thought of her first, even if she and her friends had decided that ZipZing probably couldn't help them. Justin may have instantly rejected her friend request, tried to bind her, and almost killed her accidentally, but he'd also gifted her a free healing item, and offered to escort her to safer territory.

Danika's feelings just weren't being logical. She glared at SaltySiamese's name on her friend list. It listed her as an elven archer, with an accumulated level of 55. Her current location was 'Emberton', which, when Danika flicked over to the game site and examined the map south of the central human capital, was about as far south as Oliva was east.

Danika sighed, and reminded herself that she didn't have to always be logical, and that anger and irritation were normal human reactions. She closed her menus, and as the last of her anger drained away it was replaced by frustrated tears. Her seed radishes were gone, and in their place were some sort of small rodent burrows. Her wings were sparkling with lavender sparks, but she couldn't appreciate it.

She had just decided that she might as well log off for the night, when Aishin's little messenger bat arrived and waited for her to take its message. Danika accepted the message with a sigh. It read: "What are you up to tomorrow? I should be free all day, and I've got a quest you might like?"

"I have nothing planned, but is it ok to take a novice along? I was about to log off for the night, but I could summon the merchant to have him escort me out of the forest first," Danika replied promptly. Her little grey bird flitted off cheerfully.

Aishin's bat was back a moment later. "You have a summon scroll for the merchant? Don't use it!!!" Danika read the message with a puzzled frown. She wondered what Aishin thought would happen if she used the scroll.

Another bat fluttered up, it was struggling to carry a much larger message. This one read: "And of course it's ok, unless you think the people who got to play the beta should only be playing with other beta players. Only people who started immediately after the game officially opened and play all day have leveled their skills enough to even reach Proficient. The areas around the popular racial capitals are really crowded right now. Wait there and I'll come get you. Those scrolls are selling for a minimum of 25,000."

"Why would it be worth so much? He just gave it to me, I didn't even have to buy it?" Danika sent.

"You can't buy them from the traveling merchant, and no one I've heard of has been

able to create them. So far people have only received them during quests involving him, and those seem to be pretty rare," Aishin returned.

## ***41: Ubiquitous Merchant***

While Danika waited for Aishin she rather spitefully dribbled water from the squirrel's gem into the new rodent burrows. After awhile a plump shrew popped out of a nearby burrow and made sharp angry squeaking noises at her, so high pitched that they sounded almost bird-like.

Danika stuck her tongue out at it and tossed a colored light cantrip at it. The light particles bounced harmlessly off of the shrew, but it jumped in fright and dove into its burrow. Danika laughed and stowed the aqua gem. A few minutes later the shrew, or another like it popped up from a different burrow entrance.

Danika threw her light at it again. She knew that tormenting the shrew was childish and pointless, and that she didn't even have any proof that it had been the shrew who had eaten her seed radishes, but scaring it still felt a bit satisfying. After smiting the shrew several times with her colored lights, she even discovered that she could sort of link her color cantrip to the impact and transfer it to the shrew. It made it look like she was throwing paint balls at it, and she laughed.

Danika's childish revenge occupied her until Aishin finally arrived. It took him over an hour to make it to her, and he was somewhat tattered looking. "On the way back we are going a long way around the fairy dell," he announced firmly.

"Fairies did that to you?" Danika questioned with wide eyes. She remembered that Quin had mentioned being afraid of a pixie pod too.

Aishin shook his head. "It was their pets, or maybe they were livestock. An enormous flock of ducks," he sighed and added, "you can laugh."

Danika had been too amazed by the answer to laugh at first, but when he added that, she started to giggle.

Aishin flashed a smile at her. The shrew popped up again between them and Danika fired one last shot of light at it. She grinned toothily as it dove back into its burrow.

Aishin asked doubtfully, "Do you dislike rodents?"

Danika thought about it for a moment. "Not as long as they're not bothering me?" she answered.

"Oh," Aishin replied with relief.

"Why?" Danika asked.

Aishin winked. "Because the quest I have, that I thought you'd enjoy, is a bounty contract on some fairy mice. They've been causing trouble at a patisserie shop," he told her.

Danika asked doubtfully, "Are we going to kill them?"

"Nope, we're going to catch them and get paid twice, once for the bounty, and once when we sell them to the pet shop," Aishin replied with a quick grin.

--

Like when they'd traveled down the mountain side, they moved very swiftly across the countryside. Aishin ruthlessly cut down anything that targeted either of them.

Danika zipped along at her top speed, looking a bit like a small sparkly kite trailing along behind Aishin as he ran. The forests gave way to meadows that in turn gave way to woods. Her flight skill gained another level, and when the soft distant chime rang Aishin said, "Congrats!"

"You can hear that?" Danika asked with surprise. No one had seemed aware of it before.

"Only because we're in the same party and close to each other," Aishin explained.

"Oh, thanks!" Danika replied and her wings sparkled with sky blue tones.

When she saw that an elegant looking buck had decided that offense was the best defense, as the rest of his herd scattered behind him, she threw her own wind slash at his nose. As the deer startled away from them, unknowingly spared from his imminent demise, Aishin complimented her, "Nice attack."

"Thanks," she said again. "My friend was probably right though, I don't do very much damage."

"You said you can teach skills as well as learn them right?" Aishin questioned.

Danika nodded, and then realized that he couldn't see her as she flew along behind him. "Yes," she answered, "although I haven't tried it yet."

"After this fairy mice contract quest is completed tomorrow, let's try it," he suggested. "I'd like to learn that attack, and I'm sure I've got a few useful skills that you could use?"

"Ok," Danika agreed.

They tumbled rather abruptly out of the next patch of woods and over a low fence into a field. Aishin changed direction and vaulted over the next fence onto the small lane that ran between the field and its neighbors.

They traveled at more moderate speeds along the lanes and roads. Even slowing down to a walking pace as they passed through several villages and towns.

The traveling merchant was in the third village square that they visited. Danika paused and darted over to him.

"You're looking well ZipZing," the merchant greeted her with a smile.

"Thanks," Danika replied. A little guiltily she added, "Um, my friend met me, so I didn't use your scroll."

"That's great," the traveling merchant replied cheerfully. He didn't ask that she return it, and Danika breathed a sigh of relief.



She nodded and waved farewell as she caught up to Aishin.

--

They saw the merchant again on the outskirts of the next town, talking to another player. Danika came to a halt and stared. Aishin stopped and laughed at her puzzled expression. "Did they summon him?" Danika asked.

"Probably not," Aishin replied. "I think he visits every town and village in the game at least once a day, and he can be in more than one place at a time."

Danika frowned. "Don't tell me he's the only NPC merchant in this game?" she asked incredulously. That would be too incredibly lazy of the developers in a game that contained thousands of types of fairly realistic plants and animals in addition to their catalog of legendary and fantasy types.

Aishin laughed again. "Of course not, didn't you visit any shops before you left town?" he asked with amusement.

Danika replied, "Oliva didn't have any shops. Maybe it was too small?"

An expression of shock flashed a bit unnaturally across Aishin's face as he tapped an emote that Danika probably would also have chosen to display surprise, but that was a bit extreme when actually shown on a face. "You didn't start the game in some fairy dragon city somewhere?" he questioned.

"No, I kind of suspect there isn't such a thing," Danika replied. They resumed their progress and she continued. "My egg seemed to have appeared in a pixie nest, but was sold to a player. I was carried to Oliva before I hatched, and this wizard tried to bind me as his familiar. After I ran away, the witch in the town gave me that long moonflower quest."

There were more and more people as they drew closer to the human capital. Danika complained, "I wish I had an always on mode for my menu lens so that I could see with a glance which people are players."

Aishin smirked and told her, "It's one of my path skills. Analyze targets, at first level it can turn on and off the display of labels in normal view."

"Are you using it all the time?" Danika asked suspiciously.

"I'm using it now, but I usually turn it off when I'm in the market in the city because there's just too much," Aishin replied cheerfully.

Danika landed on his shoulder and gazed at him intently, to his amusement, the rest of the way to the capital. She was trying to activate her assimilation skill, but she wasn't very hopeful about it, since she couldn't see any evidence of his skill working.

When they reached the city Danika stopped watching Aishin, and she gazed around in amazement. There were hundreds, possibly thousands of people of various races crowding the human capital's broad streets. The buildings got taller the farther they progressed.

Aishin grinned at her. "This is just the outer city," he said, "wait until you see the

market square. I don't know if it's a good thing that the teleport gates are near the market or not, but that way a lot of the market traffic never comes out here, they just portal in and out. Every large city has at least one portal, like the one you used to leave the beginner's vale." He flashed another grin. "The traveling merchant is almost always available in the market during the day," he added teasingly.

## *42: The First Major Update*

When they reached the crowded market square that lay at the center of the human capital, Danika was extremely glad that fairy dragons could fly. People obviously tried to avoid pressing up against Aishin's tall dark avatar, with its somewhat tattered but concealing clothes and various bladed weapons, but he was still practically elbowing his way through the crowd.

On the north side of the square rose sturdy stone walls, protecting the highest tower in the city. Most of the south edge was faced by a large cathedral, that Danika felt clashed with the depiction of the Jade Emperor in his elaborate oriental robes above the entrance. Other deities and dragons gazed out at the crowd from their own nooks.

The east was bordered by what Danika could only describe as shopping malls. The large buildings were covered in signage for various kinds of shops, and they loomed nearly as tall as the cathedral. The west held a series of raised daises, round platforms with a standing portal at the center of each. The area was separated from the market square by only a series of raised flowerbeds, but no vendor had crossed that insubstantial line.

The market itself was crammed with vendors selling from elaborate carts, narrow tents, plain tables, and even mats laid on the ground. In some places people were struggling to maintain lines in front of popular merchants, in others the merchants were struggling to attract the attention of any passerby.

Aishin slowly forced his way across the square toward the permanent shops, and Danika fluttered erratically along behind him. Her progress was frequently disrupted as interesting displays and characters caught her attention. Fortunately their party menu provided the little compass for relocating Aishin when she lost sight of him.

The center of the large building full of shops that they entered was, to Danika's surprise, occupied by a tranquil garden with tall stands of bamboo that reached toward the open sky overhead. The quiet garden was almost a physical shock after the tumultuous noise of the market square. Flights of stairs rose on every side of the garden to balconies lined with shop fronts.

Aishin entered the garden space before turning to Danika and saying, "Getting here took a bit longer than I hoped, so I have to log off now and I might be a little late in the morning."

"Ok," Danika replied quickly. "Maybe I'll sleep in a bit tomorrow!"

"Ok," Aishin agreed, and flashed a grin at her as he logged out.

Danika decided to explore the shops on the first floor before logging out. She quickly discovered that she didn't really need to use her menu lens to tell the difference between the NPCs and the players here. The players would point and talk, or even just stare at her with wide startled eyes as she zipped past, but the NPCs greeted her the same way they did every other customer who entered their shop.

The first floor seemed to be occupied by outfitters of various sorts. The shops sold mostly armor, clothing, and bags. There was one shop full of amazing hats though, they had everything from bonnets to conical wizard's caps and elegant top hats.

Most of the merchants had apologized that they had no gear that would fit her, after their standard greetings were complete, but the hatter offered, "Our elemental series of hats might fit you."

The hatter directed her to a small rack of miniature headwear. Danika giggled over the miniature acorn shell helms, glossy spiked shell caps, and little silken flower bonnets. She even tried on one curly snail like shell in rainbow hues. It made her look like she had a colorful pompadour, which was amusing, but not a fashion she wanted to sport.

She logged out in a cheerful mood.

--

Danika slept well, and woke up at her usual time despite having set her alarm later. While she brushed her teeth, after eating breakfast beside her window, she opened the first layer of "Living Jade Empire" on her phone. Danika stopped brushing and stared at the notification with dismay.

It read: "Living Jade Empire is currently offline for maintenance while our first major update is applied! In the meantime if you will allow your mobile device access to your step counter or gyroscope, you can complete this mini quest for 10 Karma! Thank you for your patience." A timer ticked away beneath it, showing that the game was expected to come back online about noon, and below that was a progress bar for the mini quest.

Danika finished brushing her teeth in a rush and then submitted a complaint through the bug report section. She didn't really expect it would be answered, since it wasn't really a bug and they were probably receiving thousands of complaints.

To her surprise she received a reply before she finished her exercises that read: "From the honorable celestial servant of the first class, Hugh Brant, fifth among his rank, serving the Jade Emperor in the maintenance of the Living Jade Empire: Thank you for your feedback, your idea of solving this issue by accepting GPS locations from registered parks, care facilities and hospitals in addition to step counts has been accepted and the quest has been updated. Please reload the game application."

Danika restarted the game application. The progress bar for the mini quest now had four marks evenly spaced along it, and the quest description had an addition that read, "or allow your device to report your GPS location and collect four time stamps at these registered locations." The following link included not only the types of places that Danika had suggested, but many merchant locations that were affiliated with the company that had produced "Living Jade Empire."

Danika tried sending a message to Aishin, and discovered that thankfully the messaging system was still functioning during the update. She sent: "I'm going to go out for a while and try to complete the mini quest while the game updates, but I may not be back by noon."

Aishin replied so quickly that Danika was certain that he already had his phone open on the same screen: "I've already started it. Don't worry about rushing back, I'll wait for you."

--

Danika heaved herself over the edge of the VR-medi pod at 12:23. She was afraid that she'd have to wait for her system to install an update before she could log in, but apparently all the changes had been made on the server side of the game.

She logged in to discover a dark screen with a system notification that read:

"Every portal fee has been reduced to 1 Karma, and a login bonus of 1 Karma per day has been established."

"Permanently available quests have been added in addition to the individualized quests that the game will continue to generate. The first series of permanent quests will feature the most requested subject: messenger animals. The first person or party to complete each of the new messenger animal quests will gain a golden version of the animal as well as the usual version!"

"To relieve the extreme crowding in the racial capitals that has not naturally reduced over the past month as our developers expected, we have upgraded several towns for each race to be suitable for novice populations. Every player currently ranked as a novice may choose below to enter the game at either a recommended town, or at your previous location."

Danika hesitated before choosing to log in at her current location. She was curious about the recommended town and took note of its name: Windbur.

Aishin was waiting in the center of the bamboo garden. He'd obviously updated his outfit, as he was now dressed in an undamaged version with a silkier sheen to the cloth. Danika silently pouted a little that his pretty face was almost completely covered again, and wondered if it was because of the people who'd called him a rich brat.

He smiled at her and the expression stayed on his face. She could tell by the way his cheeks lifted and his eyes crinkled. She zipped up to him and declared excitedly, "You're not playing on your phone today!"

"I'm not," he agreed laughingly. "I'm at home and playing on our full motion console. Ready to go catch some fairy mice?"

### 43: Fairy Mice

"Sure," Danika agreed before asking, "but since it's your quest, will I receive any Karma?"

Aishin blinked at her. "Ah, the Karma I owe you. Sorry I haven't arranged anything yet," he replied, "but you should have already received about 5 extra Karma from my quests since the party was formed. I'm sure I've received a bit from your quests."

"Don't go arranging weird transfers on my account," Danika protested, and then added with some embarrassment, "I had just assumed that the amount I received from my quests was increasing as I gained levels, I didn't realize I was leeching off your quests."

He laughed. "No, the amount of Karma per quest seems kind of arbitrary and usually defaults to one point no matter your accumulated level. It's not leeching because we wouldn't earn any more Karma by going solo, and even if it was, I owe you." He glanced at her. "Like you pointed out before, this isn't a single player game," he finished

"If it's multiplying the Karma, why isn't everyone running around in huge parties?" Danika questioned. She didn't recall anything about the party system multiplying Karma from the brief information on the main site.

Aishin laughed. "Most people are, that's what the guild system is for, but there's a 5 Karma daily limit," he informed her.

Danika had skipped over the information on guilds, figuring that it didn't matter until she joined one. She pulled up the menu and looked up the guild and party systems. The information repeated what Aishin told her and added that there was a matching 5 person limit to the party size. There was no limit on guild size, and a potential additional 5 Karma that he hadn't mentioned was available from guild specific quests. The most surprising bit of information was that you had to wait for a month before being able to join another guild if you left one, which was a lot longer than most games demanded.

"What guild are you in then?" she asked curiously.

"I don't think you'd like it," Aishin replied doubtfully, "I'm in 'Blood Hunters', nobody talks much and most of our quests are assassinations and bounties."

"Bounties like these mice?" Danika questioned.

"This one is pretty cutesy compared to most of the guild quests," he explained.

Overhead someone shouted. Danika looked up just as something was tossed into the air above them. A dozen small winged figures dove after the item and struggled with it in the air. It broke apart and the little creatures zipped back in the direction they'd come from.

Beneath a fine rain of crumbs Aishin said, "I think that's our cue," and darted toward the stairs.

After a moment Danika shot upward after the flying creatures. She suspected that both her evasion skill and her flying skill activated as she narrowly dodged something that she hadn't even consciously registered as it flew past. More angry shouts followed the

missile.

Aishin snatched her out of the air as he bounded past. "Oops it didn't occur to me that you'd get mistaken for one of them," he muttered.

The angry shopkeeper caught sight of Aishin and shouted, "It's about time! I contacted your guild a week ago!"

Aishin nodded calmly and replied, "I'm sure you were informed that a master wouldn't be able to fulfill your contract immediately at that time, it was your choice to insist on the contract grade you chose."

The shopkeeper pointed at Danika where Aishin had set her on his shoulder and demanded, "Then what is that little Novice fairy creature doing here with you? If you don't succeed in getting rid of them," he pointed accurately at the little group of fairy mice zipping around the shop, "by the end of the day, I'm cancelling that bounty!"

Danika stared at the fairy mice. Somehow she'd half expected them to look like bats, which were often referred to as winged mice. Instead they were more like her, with four limbs in addition to their wings. Unlike her, not just their wings, but their entire bodies were semi-transparent, although they didn't sparkle as much.

The little flock squeaked and flitted around the ceiling wildly. A disturbing image flashed across her mind.

"What's wrong?" Aishin asked.

Danika glanced away from the fairy mice and asked, "What?"

"Your wings are sparkling a weird muddy green?" Aishin told her. One of the fairy mice zipped too close to him and his hand flashed out and caught it as neatly as he'd caught her before. His menu screen shimmered faintly as he pulled a wicker bird cage out of his inventory and stuffed the mouse into it.

Danika replied with embarrassment, "Oh, I just wondered, why would a pixie, y'know, with a mouse?"

"But you take centaurs, minotaurs, mermaids and the like for granted?" Aishin questioned with amusement.

"Ok, fine, people are just like that." She rolled her eyes and threw her light cantrip out above the mice and made the particles scatter like a firework bursting above them. Like the shrew had, the mice squeaked and shied away from the lights even though it didn't hurt them.

The shopkeeper squeaked and scurried almost as quickly as the mice had to cover the pastries that were sitting out on display. Danika ignored his glares and didn't bother to explain that it was merely a light cantrip and wouldn't hurt his pastries.

"Just tell yourself that it was probably a magically induced crossbreed," Aishin suggested with a wink as he snatched another couple of the mice, who had fled in his direction, neatly out of the air.

Danika zipped upward while emitting her best dazzle and commented dryly, "I thought the sparkles changing color with emotions was cool, but now I think it's a little unfair that I can't turn it off."

"It's really cute though," Aishin replied with a grin, looking at the pink and violet shaded sparks that had replaced the muddy green.

"Well, that's true," she agreed more cheerfully, and her sparkles lightened into their usual range again.

He laughed as she huffed a breath at one of the mice who were zipping about frantically too high for Aishin to reach. The mouse spun dizzily and then dropped out of the air. It seemed that her guess was right and their wings functioned the same as her own.

Aishin caught it and stuffed it into the cage with its fellows, and Danika pulled out one of her cheeses and nibbled on it before continuing.

"You have to eat pretty often," Aishin commented.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Although not as often as I used to, at first I could only cast or use my breath attack about 3 times before depleting my energy."

"You should try to learn my meditation skill," Aishin suggested. "It takes a long time, but can increase both health and energy capacity."

"More catching and less talking," complained the shopkeeper. He huffed angrily when they both laughed.

Most of the fairy mice were caught fairly easily, but the last one was too smart and agile for Danika to hit with her breath attack. It never fled to a spot that Aishin could reach it either. Finally Aishin asked, "Can you try to hit it with your magic missile?"

"I don't have magic missile," Danika replied questioningly.

Aishin blinked at her and then obviously called up his menu lens to examine her. "You don't," he agreed with surprise. "What were you using on that mouse in the forest?"

"You can see my skills?" Danika questioned.

Aishin winked and replied, "You didn't think my analyze target skill was still first level did you?"

"Wow, that must be useful for an assassin," she replied thoughtfully.

"It's the first skill specialization for the path," he agreed.

"I was just throwing my light cantrip combined with my color cantrip at that shrew," Danika informed him. She eyed the mouse and suggested, "I could try hitting it with my spark."

Aishin blinked and told her, "Everyone says you have to touch your target to use most cantrips, and if you could touch it we'd already have caught it."



Danika lifted her hands, cast her spark and watched it drop from the tip of her claws toward the stone tiled floor. She nodded. "The default position is like that," she agreed, "but I can move my light particles around pretty much at will, so if I attach it to that cantrip I can put it anywhere I can see." She looked at the last fairy mouse and added, "Get ready to catch it if it falls."

"Ready," he replied with his gaze locked on the mouse.

Danika sent her combined cantrips zinging toward the last fairy mouse. It emitted a pained squeak as the spark burned it, and its wings stopped beating for a second. That moment was just enough for Aishin to leap up and finally snatch it from the air.

He stuffed it quickly into the wicker cage with the rest, then looked up at her and said with a grin, "Well done! You're going to be insanely powerful someday if you can do that much with just your basic cantrips."

"Is it that unusual?" she questioned.

Aishin nodded, and then turned to the shopkeeper and informed him triumphantly, "We've caught your entire mischief of mice."

## ***44: Ordinary Stones***

"Finally," snapped the shopkeeper. He peered around his own shop suspiciously before turning and pulling out a tray of delicious smelling cheese topped pastries from one of the ovens behind him.

The shopkeeper kept a wary eye on the pastries for several long minutes as they steamed gently. Danika sent Aishen a questioning look. Aishin shrugged helplessly.

The fairy mice in the wicker cage were straining at the bars and trying to escape. They seemed very excited by the cheese pastry. Danika watched them worriedly.

After another couple of minutes Aishin asked, "Can I collect the reward now so that we can take these little pests off to dispose of them?"

The shopkeeper sniffed and then nodded. "If no more mice have shown up for these pastries in another five minutes," he agreed.

"Can't you put them in your inventory?" Danika asked Aishin.

He shook his head and replied, "I don't have the right type to hold living creatures, that's why I got this cage."

Danika moved her old salt sack into the pouch where her cheese had been, and then tried to place the cage into her inventory ring. A system message popped up that read: "This item cannot store living creatures safely, do you wish to continue?"

Danika quickly cancelled the action and said with disappointment, "Apparently neither do I." She thought back to how the slime skins she'd stored hadn't decayed while in her inventory and decided that the space probably lacked air.

After a moment she landed on Aishin's shoulder and pulled out the pouch holding her foods and seeds. Technically her apples and seeds should be alive, so she tried placing the cage into that pouch, this time a different notification popped up: "This item is too large to fit into this space."

"Do you have room for about 50 radishes?" Danika asked.

Aishin blinked and replied, "Um, sure? Probably?"

The shopkeeper interrupted by finally announcing, "It seems like you really have gotten them all."

He handed Aishin a bag that Aishin peeked into and then accepted. "Thanks for hiring us," Aishin said politely.

"It took you long enough though," the shopkeeper complained.

Aishin shrugged and carried the cage out onto the balcony they'd entered the shop from without comment. This entire level of shops was given over to various types of food, and moderately crowded compared to the first floor.

"I gained 3 Karma" Aishin announced to Danika as he started down the stairs. "This quest was pretty generous. I think you should also have gained three points, but definitely at least one?"

Danika called up her menus and checked. She nodded and confirmed, "I also got three points."

The floor below the patisserie seemed to be given over to weapons. Several shops had dwarves behind their counters, and one shop seemed to be staffed exclusively by gnomes. There were also humans, elves, and even a centaur in other shops.

The second floor held the most variety of shops. There were enchantment ingredient suppliers, beauticians, potions, and more. Aishin didn't pause, until they reached the ground floor. There he asked, "Do you mind spending a point of Karma on a portal? Since they lowered the cost, we'll probably get more from these guys if we take them to the elven capital. Elves seem to really love magical pets."

Danika hesitated for a moment. With the Karma from this quest she had only one point less than her accumulated level, and could almost afford to revive if she needed to. But she was also curious about what the elven capital would be like so she decided to go ahead. "We can do that," she agreed.

Aishin stepped out of the building into the market square, and Danika activated her wings and rose into the air so that she could see farther. The market was still busy and full, but it wasn't as packed as it had been. If anything, this made it a more distracting place to cross though, because she could see more of what the various vendors were selling.

Aishin crossed the market swiftly, and Danika followed, though her head rotated swiftly back and forth like the proverbial country bumpkin just come to town.

Just before they reached the division between the market square and the portals, Danika spotted a very small sad looking display. A little gnome was seated glumly on a mat, with a variety of ordinary looking stones arrayed in front of him.

She zipped over and dropped to the ground in front of the mat. The gnome glanced up hopefully, but then his face fell. "I'm sorry," he said politely, "but these are too expensive for a novice character." He added a little more conversationally, "Your character is super cute though, you must have played a lot of games for a long time to afford it!"

Aishin noticed that he'd lost her and used the party compass to find her where she sat on the ground in front of the gnome. Danika watched curiously as the gnome perked up at the sight of him and actually stood up and waved. "A master assassin! One of my stones would be perfect for you!" the gnome exclaimed.

"What do your stones do?" Danika asked curiously.

The gnome answered her, but directed his explanation toward Aishin. "They are large pocket spaces with permanent enchantments for air and light, anyone who knows the activation word can enter!"

"Wow!" Danika exclaimed. "When you say light, do they have sunlight?"

The gnome shot her a puzzled frown and then returned his gaze to Aishin, who said

sharply, "Don't ignore her because she's a novice and a girl, she's my important party member."

The gnome protested loudly, "I've got nothing against girls!" He returned his gaze to Danika. "No, they have a lamp light that you can turn on and off so you can use the space like a room in a house," he explained, then looked up at Aishin again and added a bit sharply, "but they cost over 20,000 in materials to enchant, that's way out of the price range of a Novice."

Danika nodded and agreed, "I've only gotten a couple of items that might be worth enough so far."

The gnome stared at her with shock and Aishin grinned at him, held up the cage and said dryly, "She owns half of these, and possesses a summon scroll for the traveling merchant."

Danika sighed and both of them looked at her. "They seem great, but they'd be so much more useful if they had sunlight inside," she complained.

"Why?" Aishin asked, at the same time as the gnome asked, "Why does it make a difference what sort of light it is?"

"Then I could plant things inside of one, and carry it around with me until they were ready to harvest," she explained.

"Okay," Aishin said doubtfully.

"Portable garden spaces?" the gnome asked thoughtfully. "I guess that could work. I wonder if they'd sell better?" Before Danika could venture an answer he added glumly, "Probably not though, they'd be almost twice as expensive as they are now, because they'd need an illusion linking gemstone."

Aishin asked curiously, "Illusion linking?"

"The Far View enchantment uses a gemstone that is cut in half, and then one half displays what the other half sees. It gradually consumes the gem, so since better quality gems last longer, I'd probably have to use diamond," the gnome explained.

"If I give you the summon scroll now, could you make me one like that?" Danika asked quickly. "I promise I'd come back and pay the other half, but it might take me a little while." She assumed the pose and pulled up her menu. Her lens told her that the gnome was called "Logical Heart" and he was a Genius Enchanter. She sent him a friend request.

Aishin opened his mouth and then shut it again without saying anything.

Logical Heart gave Danika a startled look and asked, "You'd trust me to make it for you after taking such an expensive item?"

"If you accept my request, I'll be able to find you again," Danika pointed out.

Aishin added quietly, "Plus, if you agree to it and don't carry through, I can find you later."

Danika and Logical Heart both looked at him for a long moment. Aishin shrugged. Logical Heart accepted her friend request and gave a little cough. "We can just write up an enchanted contract, and then the system will enforce it," he said stoutly.

#### *45: Say that in elvish?*

"Sell me one of the stones that you've got first, before one of these little guys escapes?" Aishin suggested. Several fairy mice were gnawing on the wicker bars of their cage with obvious dedication.

Logical Heart nodded. "They are all the same inside, so just choose whichever stone suits you," he said.

Aishin chose a smooth dark grey stone, and counted out approximately 20,000 worth of coin in various sizes of coin hearts.

Logical Heart looked at the coin. "That's only enough to cover the material cost," he protested with embarrassment.

"I'm a bit low on coin at the moment," Aishin said, and poured out the rest of his coins, including what he'd collected from the patisserie. Danika's appraisal valued them at about 5,300 coin, and Aishin asked, "Will this be enough?"

Logical Heart sighed, but agreed, "Sure. The activation word for that one is 'darkheart'."

Aishin touched the stone and repeated, "darkheart." He vanished.

Danika watched the space where he'd stood a bit worriedly when he didn't immediately reappear. Even Logical Heart started to glance at the stone worriedly after another long minute passed.

Danika asked hesitantly, "Should I try it?"

Aishin finally reappeared before Logical Heart answered her. "It took me a bit to figure out the exit, but it's perfect," Aishin said laughingly when he saw their worried faces. He no longer carried the cage full of fairy mice.

"You just touch the center stone and say 'exit'," Logical Heart protested. He covered his face and mumbled, "I forgot to tell you that didn't I?"

Aishin and Danika both nodded.

While Logical Heart crafted the enchanted contract, Aishin asked, "Mind a suggestion?"

"Depends on what you suggest," the gnome answered logically.

"Make a deal with one of the good equipment merchants to sell them on commission, even if you have to double the price to make the same profit, I think they'd probably sell a lot better. I'd probably never have stopped to ask why you were selling plain rocks," Aishin explained.

"Oh," Logical Heart replied thoughtfully.

"That's actually a pretty good idea," Danika agreed. "But why are you trying to sell

them like this in the first place? As an enchanter who works with space enchantments, shouldn't you be able to create portals for people if you need coin?"

Logical Heart groaned and said sourly, "If I have to enchant one more portal this week I'm reincarnating on the combat path!"

"That seems like a waste, when you're the first Genius ranked player that I've seen yet," Aishin commented.

Danika gazed at the gnome with wide eyes, and he shrugged.

"Anyway," Logical Heart said, "I'm pretty sure I'm the first person to assemble a storage space enchantment this way into a habitable space, so I made as many as I could. I figured that they'd sell easily, but practically no one even stops to ask. I'll try your suggestion and talk to some of the merchants in our guild." He held out the finished contract to Danika. "Touch this and declare your agreement," he instructed.

Danika glanced over the contract quickly and said firmly, "I agree!"

"You should have read the whole thing first," Aishin scolded.

Danika looked up at him and blinked. "I did," she replied. "I owe him 20,000 coin when it's finished, and he promised to complete it within a week, which was written as a month in the game's time."

--

The portal to the elven capital was rimmed in entwined vines. The dais was a busy one, as people entered and exited the portal in a fairly steady flow. Each person who entered reached out a hand to touch the shimmering space and paused before stepping through.

Aishin waited for ZipZing to go through first, and she discovered that the pause had been for the system notification that popped up and asked: "Spend 1 Karma to teleport to Tamworth?"

Danika accepted, and a moment later she was hovering with the portal behind her, looking out at a new place. Like the elven wizard in the beginner's vale, the elven city was beautiful and yet classically elven. Anyone who read many fantasy stories or played many RPGs would look at it and think 'elven city!'

Aishin exited the portal beside her and stepped forward into the path where several elves and a human were waiting patiently for their turns. Danika zipped forward, and gave them an apologetic nod.

The elven capital didn't have a market square the way the human one had, but it did have a market district. Most of the elegant buildings with their various organic designs had hanging signs with elegant curling script. The script looked strangely familiar and Danika commented, "I thought that language was copywritten."

"That just means you know who to pay if you want to use it. It's easy for a company that can build enormous computers in space, and then dedicate one to a game just to show the world what their hardware can do," Aishin pointed out.

He seemed to be searching for a particular shop. "Can you read these signs?" Danika questioned.

Aishin nodded, and a passing elf pointed to ZipZing and exclaimed, "Varya onna!"

"Inwilis rámalócë," another elf replied.

Danika pulled up her menus and used her lens on them. The first speaker had been a player, and the one who answered was an NPC. "You have to be able to speak elvish to play an elf?" Danika questioned.

The elven player gasped. "You can talk!" the elf replied in ordinary words.

Aishin laughed and asked Danika teasingly, "What makes you so sure that we're speaking the same language? This game is played world-wide and even normal translators these days are pretty fast."

The other player actually answered her question, "I can't speak elvish, but my character speaks it so I can activate the skill for as long as I wish. It's a little strange since there's a faint echo, but I think they only left that in to let us know which language we're speaking in, normally I speak in German like you do."

Danika eyed the elf with wide eyed surprise. She knew about five words of German. She wasn't certain that Aishin and the strange elf weren't teasing her, and flicked her menus over to the game site. She'd known it was a global server, but she'd just expected that to mean that she would probably meet people who spoke other languages during her adventures.

While Danika was busy with her menus, Aishin asked the elf, "Do you know where the largest pet shop is by any chance?"

The official game site said only that every player would be able to speak the common language and nothing about voice translation, but the help section had a long string of specific enquiries. Danika closed her menus as the elf answered with shock, "You can't sell people!"

Danika frowned. "Are fairy mice people?" she asked worriedly.

"He meant you," Aishin corrected laughingly.

"Oh, yeah, you can't sell me," Danika agreed, but then she hesitated, thinking of her egg, and added, "hopefully. I'll object."

Aishin laughed while the elf stared at them both. After a moment he pointed in a direction. "That way, beside the meadow," the elf said. Without another word he hurried off in the direction he'd been headed when they all stopped.



## *46: Famous Last Words*

The shopkeeper of the elven pet shop haggled with Aishin in elvish until Danika heard the soft chime of a skill ring. She assumed the pose and tapped over to her skill list. "Elven Language," was different from any of her previous skills, it had a passive mode for understanding and an active mode for speaking.

While it was a zero point skill only about one word in 10 was translated, and most of those were words like "the" and "and", but it was enough for Danika to understand what the elven player had meant by the faint echo beneath the words. It reminded her a bit of the hum beneath the pixies' words, only if she focused on it, she could tell that the echo was an elvish word.

By the time they had come to an agreement, her new skill had gained its first point, and she could understand, "fairy", "mice", "mouse", "coin", and a few other often repeated words. She thought she was learning it unrealistically quickly, but she wasn't inclined to complain.

Aishin vanished into his new stone room and returned a moment later with the cage, which he handed over to the shopkeeper in exchange for a surprisingly large pile of coin. Then he turned and grinned at Danika, and said, "Sorry, that took longer than I expected, but we did well."

Aishin carefully chose 3 of the larger coins and handed them to ZipZing. Danika used her featherweight spell to hold them up without immediately placing them into her inventory. "This is more than half," she protested.

Aishin nodded. "But it's not more than half if you include the coin from catching them," he explained.

"We really collected over a thousand per fairy mouse in the end?" Danika asked.

He grinned and nodded, and then almost immediately frowned and said, "I can't right now, I'm busy. We just finished the quest I told you about this morning."

Danika blinked and asked, "What?"

"Sorry," Aishin said quickly, "my dad is asking me to go eat with him."

"You can go if you need to. We're already done with this quest, and since this is a racial capital I should be fine on my own?" Danika replied. It had been a long time since she'd had a parent around to care when she ate. "Eating with your family when you can is not a bad thing."

Aishin laughed. "Fine," he agreed with a grin. He winked and added, "Since you are both saying similar things, I'll log off and go eat." He warned her, "I might not be back for a couple of hours, so be careful. Even though the racial capitals are pretty safe for their own race, sometimes they can be more dangerous for visitors."

"I'll be ok," Danika promised, and Aishin smiled and logged out. She thought a bit guiltily that maybe she ought to message her family when she logged out; it had been awhile since she'd seen any of them in person.

She swiftly dropped to the floor of the pet shop and stowed the large coin hearts in the sack that held the remaining coin from the frog's tooth. Her inventory was feeling a bit difficult to shuffle, with bags layered inside of bags, since even if they couldn't hold other bags of holding, her pouches of holding were capable of holding the ordinary salt sacks. The embroidered one was still filled with radishes though.

A system notification popped up and asked: "Accept taming and become the shopkeeper's pet?"

Danika hit reject and activated her wings. She zipped out of the pet shop at her top speed, as the shopkeeper shouted something in elvish behind her. The nearest elves turned and looked at her with startled faces, and one of them raised her bow and took a shot at ZipZing.

Her evasion was good enough that the first shot missed her entirely, but the next shot grazed her. Even though it only grazed her and she was able to keep flying, it felt like she'd been slashed along her whole body. Red orange sparkles streamed off her wings. Her brain finally kicked in out of self defense and she remembered to cast her invisibility.

Danika streaked away from the pet shop in the direction of the leafiest tree in sight. She landed hard on the branch she'd been aiming for and activated her color cantrip. She felt cold, and brought up her menu. Her health was surprisingly low and dropping. She looked down at herself and saw that she really had effectively been sliced along her entire body.

She hurriedly tapped her wrist and withdrew Justin's apple from her pouch of holding. She took a bite. Her health stopped dropping, but she didn't immediately start healing and gaining health the way she had after she'd burned her hands. She quickly ate the rest of the apple, but there was only a small effect. Her health bar was rising very slowly.

Below her, people were shouting in elven, but then more and more of them began to repeat, "carni-PVP!"

Danika's curiosity was too strong and she crawled along the branch until she could peek through the leaves with her lens. The person who'd shot her was a proficient archer, with more than twice her level and had been tagged with a red PVP flag. She was protesting with a stream of quick elven words to the shocked crowd and pointing in the direction of the pet shop.

Danika checked her health again to make sure that it was still rising slowly, and logged out.

--

As Danika disconnected herself from the VR-medi pod, her stomach growled loudly, and she laughed. Apparently Aishin's father hadn't been wrong to badger him into stopping to eat together.

She'd been having so much fun that she hadn't paid any attention to the time, and only now realized that she'd skipped lunch by hurrying home from the mini quest and diving straight into the game. She pulled herself over the edge and dropped to the floor.

She was a little surprised to realize how few options she had left for food as she prepared a quick dinner. She'd been keeping really busy lately between holding a regular shift and playing "Living Jade Empire." She submitted a new grocery order as she ate, and marked it for delivery in the morning.

She also sent a quick message to the group of people she had labeled family: "I am doing well. Just finished up a big contract job with one of the game studios I work for now and then. I've been playing "Living Jade Empire" a lot, that new game I mentioned that can be played on almost any system. I've been playing mostly through my VR-medi pod. My character is called "ZipZing" if any of you want to add me there."

Danika cleaned up after her quick meal and gazed out at the sky for awhile. She wondered what made this sky seen through glass feel more real than the sky she could fly freely beneath. Honestly, her eyes couldn't tell any difference between the quality of the two views. Maybe it was simply that she knew this one was real.

She waited until the rest of an hour had passed before pulling herself back over the edge of the VR-medi pod. She hoped that ZipZing would be fully healed. It would just be too embarrassing to have to admit that she'd almost died as soon as Aishin had logged off.

## *47: A Harrowing Tale*

Danika logged in to find ZipZing mostly healed and the environment around the tree that she was hiding in quieter than it had been. She had just started to relax when the nearest leaves reached for her.

"One of my traps just triggered!" someone shouted.

Danika used her wind slash on the leaves, cast her invisibility and fled through the gap. "There's a spell being cast there!" someone else shouted below her.

A quick glance showed that the last speaker was, of course, another elf. As part of their dragon heritage, elves had innate magic that let them see magic as if they were constantly casting detect magic. At the moment that seemed really unfair and Danika tried to simply log out again.

The system notification informing her that she was currently in combat was pierced by a real magic missile that not only sent her spinning, but was every bit as painful as the boiling water from the fox's geyser. She landed hard on the stones of an elegant elven pathway.

Danika rolled quickly to her feet, but was immediately wrapped in dozens of threads and securely tied. She followed the threads with her eyes and saw that a cute girl with wings like hers, but much larger, held a spindle, and that the threads were actually a single thread binding her with something similar to her own Binding String skill.

"I caught it!" the girl squealed triumphantly.

"Why are you doing this?" Danika asked sharply. "What did I ever do to you?!"

An elf walked up behind her and pushed her over onto her back with his foot. Danika glared up at him and wished that she did know an area attack spell. The elf sneered. "Don't pretend you're innocent! You tricked our Callie into thinking you were a dangerous escaped pet and got her marked with a red PVP flag!" he declared angrily.

Danika gazed at him disbelievingly and then swiveled her head to see the fairy girl and another human player. None of these people were the elven archer woman who'd originally shot her. "You're all insane!" Danika accused.

"Don't insult my guild family like that you stinking novice," said a woman's voice. Danika whipped her head back around to see that it was the elven archer. Other elves were starting to take notice of the commotion and gathering around. The elven members of the little guild spoke quickly to them in elvish.

Danika's new skill only gave her a few words of it all, "pet, fairy, and lie." She quickly spoke up, "Help! Please help me!" But she couldn't access her menus and try to use elven speech with her claws bound, and the elven bystanders ignored her.

The little guild waited until they dispersed before addressing Danika again. Callie, the archer who'd shot her said, "Begging won't do you any good, I'm already marked for a week anyway, so there's nothing left to stop me from killing you and you don't even have enough Karma left to revive! Idiot!"

The little fairy girl questioned, "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"This is not a good idea!" Danika declared. She used her dragon strength and prayed for luck as she strained against the threads.

Several of the threads snapped just as the archer snapped at the fairy, "It deserves it! It was probably hired by our enemies!" Danika had to assume that the archer wasn't using voice to communicate if she couldn't tell ZipZing was a girl.

"Gee, why would people like you have enemies?" Danika asked with saccharine sweetness. She cast her light cantrip with her spark layered into it and sent the particles at each of them, targeting their eyes.

Danika didn't wait to see if it had been successful, she launched herself into the air and flew like a drunken bumble bee for the portal that had brought her to this accursed city. She smashed into the shimmering surface, slapped the system notification, and tumbled out of the air onto the portal dais in the human capital.

She lay there for a dazed second, and then whipped the embroidered pouch out of her inventory and stuffed a small radish into her jaws like the apple of a roast pig. She pulled out two more, and stowed the rest and then launched herself into the air again with a radish in either clawed hand. She dove into the streets of the city blindly, while chewing as quickly as she could.

--

When she finally landed on a decorative cornice attached to a tall building some distance from the market, she was shivering again despite the radishes. She pulled up her menus and saw that her health was still slowly decreasing. Despite feeling ice cold, she guessed that she was probably still taking burn damage from the magic missile.

For a moment she debated between trying to find a priest in time, using her own restore prayer, or risking the yellow apple from the beginner's vale. She shivered again, tapped her inventory ring and pulled out the other pouch. She withdrew the apple, and glanced at her health and energy bars again.

Danika bit the yellow apple and the strange chime that she'd only heard once before at her hatching rang out softly in the distance. It was immediately followed by half a dozen of the usual skill chimes. She glanced at her health and energy bars, which had almost instantly filled, and raised her paw to swipe over to her skills. She froze.

Danika stared at her paw, which was definitely not her usual clawed hand. It was covered in silky fur, that was tabby striped in the colors of her own human hair. The stripes varied from the color of the lightest strands in the sun, to the color of the darkest strands when damp. She already knew what she was going to see when she turned to look back across her own body, the wizard had warned her that it was the worst that could happen.

She was a housecat. Her wings were gone. She crouched lower on the narrow cornice. After a long moment she reminded herself that at least she was a healthy housecat, and the elves probably wouldn't recognize her if they managed to follow her this far. She raised her paw again and swiped over to her skill list.

The way of the Cat (subpath), had been added right below her accumulated level.

## 48: The Way of The Cat

Tapping on "The way of the Cat" brought up a description that looked like a philosophy page:

- 🐾 One never speaks of the way.
- 🐾 Everything is deserved except for that which deserves a swift revenge.
- 🐾 Nothing one does happens by accident.
- 🐾 Success after a thousand failures is still success.
- 🐾 Love is as warm as a spot in the sun.
- 🐾 Indifference is as sharp as the claw that slits the belly.
- 🐾 Hate is a waste of time, ignore it or kill it.

Danika dismissed the page and looked at the new skills listed beneath "The way of the Cat". Night Vision and Sharp Ears were natural skills like her Breath and Flight, which were currently greyed out. Claw Swipe was an attack like her Wind Slash. She already had 1 point in each of them.

Poise, Flexibility, and Status were all 0 point skills. She wondered if perhaps they were passive abilities rather than skills, as they were the same color as her 0 point Strong Luck, and had no description when she tapped them.

She was still able to activate her Dazzling, and other spells and cantrips. She commented aloud, "The way of the cat is pretty different," or at least, that's what she meant to say. What came out was, "pretty different." She tried just saying, "the way of the cat," but nothing came out. It was the same as when she'd spoken inside her egg.

Danika returned the rest of the apple to her inventory and got to her feet cautiously. She looked down. It was a long way down and she wished that she hadn't chosen such a high landing spot. The decorative cornice extended around the corner of the building, so she followed it carefully. She was hoping there was a window she could step through or an awning to jump down onto somewhere along one of the building's faces.

Danika returned to her starting point a while later, and sat down with a long sigh. The cornice continued completely around the building, but the ground was just as far away on all sides, and there hadn't been any windows at this level.

On the street below her, she spotted Aishin's tall dark figure and called out, "Up here!" He didn't appear to hear her, and after a moment she realized that it wasn't him. The person who looked like him was dressed in blue instead of black and didn't carry his blades. Through her menu lens his name was revealed as "Sky-Voice", a human and a Novice Bard.

Danika's friend list said that all three of the people on it were currently offline. After a minute she laid down, folded her paws and tucked her chin down. She had tried the pose just because it was one she'd seen cats using, but it was surprisingly comfortable. Sunset crept quickly over the human capital while she waited.

--

Danika was still a cat when Aishin's little bat arrived with a message: "Someone recognized us as we were about to leave the restaurant, so it's taking a lot longer. Sorry."

Danika sighed, but then chuckled. The sound startled her because it came out as a sort of purr. She sent back: "I understand. Once on our annual shoe shopping trip someone my mom went to school with recognized her, and we were there for two hours while they talked and talked. Um, I'm back in the human capital anyway, so I don't know if you'll want to spend another point of Karma to meet up again tonight?"

Aishin's bat returned a couple of minutes later: "I don't mind, I still want to try to learn your attack. You only shop for shoes once a year?"

Danika hesitated before replying. She rewrote her message a couple of times before her little bird was finally allowed to carry it off: "Less often now."

Aishin didn't reply again for a long time. When his little bat showed up again the moon was already overhead. His message read simply: "Finally escaped."

--

Danika used her menu screens to browse the forums while she waited. "The First Dwarven Smith" had gathered quite a following since she'd last looked. Apparently the two dwarven players had managed to craft a working flintlock pistol, and people had started flaming their posts, and telling them to go play other games.

In one of those little ironies of life, all the bad attention had actually drawn the good attention of a lot of people who suddenly became very interested in dwarves. The number of dwarven players had jumped from 2 to 20 in just a few days, and hundreds of people posted that they were just saving their Karma up to reincarnate as one.

Danika's own "1000 Karma Character" posts had been vastly boosted by the sudden interest in dwarves. She answered as many of the questions as she could, and then wrote an abbreviated summary of her recent adventures. She also warned new characters to be careful not to fall into her current state, where she might be killed without enough Karma to revive, and thus waste her 1000 Karma start.

--

Danika was still a cat, and still sitting on the high cornice when she spotted Aishin. She checked through her lens, and it was really him this time. He looked like he was tracking her through their party menu again. She got to her feet and called down, "I'm stuck up here!"

Aishin spun slowly with a puzzled appearance, but didn't reply.

Danika called out again, "Aishin! Look up! I'm the cat."

He finally looked up and asked uncertainly, "ZipZing, you can shapeshift into a cat?"

Danika replied, "It was the apple I got from the wizard in the beginner's vale."

"Are you stuck?" Aishin asked with concern.

"Yes," Danika admitted with embarrassment.

"One meow for no, two for yes?" he suggested.



Danika blinked. "Meow meow?" she said questioningly.

"Ok, just a minute," Aishin said comfortingly. He tossed a couple of his throwing stars at the side of the building and bounded upward like a goat, balancing on a toe tip for a moment at each one. On the last bounce he reached up and snatched her off the narrow ledge of the decorative cornice. He dropped neatly back down, slowing their descent as he touched each one again on the way down.

"I need to get some more of those made soon," he said a bit ruefully.

"You can't understand me can you?" Danika asked.

Aishin petted her. It felt great, and it took her a minute to realize that he hadn't answered. She pulled up her menu and sent him a message: "You can't understand me can you?" Her little bird gave her a look as it circled them and then dropped the message into Aishin's other hand.

Aishin read it and laughed. "No," he replied aloud, "it's all meows. What happened to you?"

## ***49: Inside the Dark Heart***

Danika hurriedly wrote another message: "I ate the apple I got from the wizard in the beginner's vale. I think this is temporary? His spells had a pretty long duration though."

Aishin reached out and took the message as soon as the bird appeared this time. He read it and then asked with a frown, "What injured you enough that you needed to eat it?"

Danika cringed, and Aishin petted her again. His hand was comfortably warm against her back and she wanted to just lay there and be petted instead of answering, after a moment his hand stopped though. He set her on the ground and she looked up at him quizzically.

"Sorry," he said apologetically, "it's just habit to pet a cat. Somehow I kept expecting you to purr."

Danika laughed ruefully, but the sound was silenced. "I wish I'd been purring then," she admitted. Now that she knew he was hearing everything as meows, she could hear the echo beneath her words.

"What happened?" he repeated.

She wrote it out for him as a message again: "The pet store shopkeeper tried to tame me, and when I ran away a player shot me. I logged out for an hour and ate dinner, and when I came back their guild was waiting to 'take revenge' for the PVP flag she triggered on herself."

"Who were they?" Aishin questioned sharply after reading it.

Danika shrugged.

"This is surprisingly frustrating," he said with a laugh.

"Sorry," she replied.

"Meow," he responded dryly. He dropped the dark stone on the ground against the wall and then bent and scooped her up. He stepped on the stone, whispered, "darkheart," and vanished.

Danika fell back to the ground beside the stone, landing neatly on her feet to her own surprise. Aishin reappeared and complained, "I can't take you into it?"

Danika looked up at him and then she touched her paw to the stone and repeated, "darkheart?"

The inside of Aishin's stone room was perfectly round. It didn't match the shape of the outer stone at all. It was like the inside of a sphere, with a flat floor laid about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the way up, so that the walls curved out a bit before closing in again overhead. A very similar stone was embedded in the center of the floor, and a brightly glowing gem shone down from the center of the ceiling.

Aishin appeared beside her and asked, "You're curious about why we're coming in

here aren't you?"

Danika nodded. The space had seemed quite large, but with Aishin standing in it, she could tell that it was probably only about 4 meters in diameter.

"That looks so wrong, cats don't nod," he said laughingly and plopped down to sit beside her. "That gnome is seriously undercharging for these. He should be selling them for a quarter million instead of twenty-five thousand. If some guild is trying to track you, they will have a hard time finding us in here. None of my location skills work inside this space, so I'm fairly sure that no one else's will be able to locate us while we're inside it," he explained.

Danika's eyes widened in surprise. She'd known that the gnome was probably not making a lot of profit, but Aishin was suggesting a huge difference in price. The stone was obviously like her storage ring and was storing them somewhere else. She assumed the pose and swiped at her menus with her furry paw. She sent a quick note to Logical Heart repeating what Aishin had just told her, and then composed a longer message to Aishin: "I don't know who they were, how do you see guild membership? I can't see yours either? The elven archer's name was Callie Kyo, she's the only one I got a look at through my lens. Why does it matter who they were? You don't seem to be hunting the guild that's killed you 3 times already, and they didn't even manage to kill me."

Her little bird snatched the message and pointedly circled the room three times before finally dropping the message into Aishin's hand. Aishin laughed and then read it. He pursed his lips and then replied to the last question first. "I'm the one who started the fight with the guild that wanted revenge for their guild leader, so as long as they stop hunting me, I don't mind letting it go." He narrowed his eyes and added, "If they attack me again though, I'm going to start hunting them again."

"Ah," Danika replied.

Aishin eyed her, but didn't ask what her short "mew" had meant. "Also, I'm just playing an ordinary human, I won't lose much if I'm forced to reincarnate, just skills really."

Danika wanted to object that he'd also lose his expensive avatar design, but maybe it hadn't seemed expensive to him. She started another message while he continued.

"But you'd lose all the Karma you spent creating a half dragon character. That would be really difficult to rebuild," Aishin added sharply, "and besides, that's a really stupid reason for them to be attacking you!" Danika nodded her agreement and Aishin laughed, and finished with, "I have my guild flag hidden, it's optional whether to show it or not. Here, I'll turn it on so you can see." He brought up his own menus and gestured toward himself.

Danika swiped over to look at him and could see "Blood Hunters" right beneath his green PVP flag. She swiped back and finished the message.

Aishin said thoughtfully, "You must have hit them back, since you've got a green PVP flag up."

Danika's message read: "I saw someone with the same avatar as you today! It was kind of creepy... I don't know how many of them that I hit, but I threw my spark at their eyes as I fled." Her bird eyed her and kicked the message out of her hand toward Aishin and flitted off again. She giggled, which came out as a strange purr instead of being silenced

like her laugh had been.

Aishin read it, laughed and replied, "Ouch, eyes are critical damage. I feel the same way every time I see someone wearing my avatar."

"Why do you keep it then?" she asked curiously, and then copied the question into a message.

Aishin snatched it as soon as it appeared, and the bird vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "It's good for picking up girls?" he suggested with a wink.

Danika didn't reply immediately. Every reply she could think of sounded either insulting or derogatory, and besides, he was probably joking and he wasn't entirely wrong. Even she would have to admit that she really liked the face he wore. Finally she wrote dryly: "Says the guy who had an empty friend list on purpose?"

The bird swooped through the room with a bored expression as Aishin grabbed the message and read it. He stuck his tongue out and said lightly, "You don't have to keep someone on your friend list if all you want to do is play around."

Danika stared at him disbelievingly.

After a minute of uncomfortable silence he asked, "Was that too much?"

"Were you just joking?" Danika asked in a scandalized tone.

Aishin didn't wait for her to write that down. He shrugged and told her, "I've tried playing around some. Doesn't everybody?" He looked her in the eyes and added, "but only with NPCs here."

She wondered if that meant he played around with people outside of the game and wrote a quick sharp reply: "NPCs don't care what you look like, and people aren't toys."

He replied dryly after he read it, "No one has ever begged you to make them your toy. Lucky. And you can just stop at NPCs don't care."

Danika wrote quickly after a moment of shocked silence. Aishin snatched up her message, but sighed and ran his hand through his hair like he was preparing himself before reading it. It read: "They have friendship levels?"

He answered with an odd bitterness, "Sure, and they'll even tell you that they love you, but if you don't see them for a week, they forget they cared and act like you abandoned them for five years."

Danika wasn't entirely sure why he cared how NPCs reacted, but maybe they reminded him of someone real. She wrote uncertainly: "Even real girls might get mad if they didn't hear from you for a month, if you mean a week in real time."

Aishin read her reply with less hesitation this time and then pointed out, "But sometimes real people will tell you they still love you after you've been separated for half a lifetime won't they? No NPC will ever do that."

"Would you really want that...?" she wrote, but then hesitated before sending it. After

a moment she sent it without adding anything.

"No," he said firmly after reading the question. "I really was just playing around with how far the system will go."

"How far will it go?" she asked curiously.

"Meow meow meow?" Aishin teased.

Danika messaged it to him, but Aishin just grinned at her. He closed one eye and touched his finger to his lips in a gesture of 'secret', and didn't say anything.

## ***50: Skill Swap***

After a minute Danika wondered if Aishin had really answered the question of why he didn't change his avatar either, but she didn't ask again. She wouldn't have done it herself because changing your avatar, aside from choosing your race at character creation, could only be done for real money.

A lot of people had complained about the cost of appearance modification ever since the beta. Even small changes like hair color cost a little money. But entirely customizing an avatar still wasn't as expensive as paying to use a licensed one.

Messenger animals had only been available for real money before the new permanent quest update too. Danika didn't mind it though because the game itself was free to play. None of your skills or stats could be modified with money, and so far the company had limited the costs to purely visual modifiers.

Danika hadn't really realized that a long silence had fallen between them until Aishin asked, "Do you want to try to learn one of my skills or try to teach me your ranged attack first?"

Danika pondered the question. She wrote a return question out and sent it: "Do you think the meditation skill you mentioned would increase the number of times I could use a skill right away?"

Aishin shook his head. "Not significantly."

She sighed and wrote another reply: "Then I'll try to teach you my 'Wind Slash' first. I know that I can learn a skill that I can see through repetition, but I'm not certain I can teach one."

Danika tapped her storage ring and removed a radish from the embroidered pouch. She targeted Aishin with her 'Impartation' skill, and then targeted the radish with her 'Wind Slash'. It seemed to be equally as effective with her cat claws as it had with her little dragon claws. She repeated the actions until the radish was reduced to shreds.

Danika ate the shreds while she got out another radish, and Aishin protested, "You don't have to eat that!" He pulled a potion bottle out of his own inventory, and then looked at her little cat face. "I don't suppose you have a bowl or a saucer either do you?" he questioned.

Danika shook her head.

Aishin poured some of the potion into the cup of his own palm, held his hand out and said encouragingly, "Don't worry, I'm pretty sure the game isn't detailed enough to have germs."

She gave him a look, but walked over and drank the potion from his hand. She wanted to ask why drinking a potion was better than eating shredded radish, but she was tired of writing messages, and the potion actually didn't taste any worse. It was a little embarrassing to lick the last of it from his hand, but it didn't seem to bother him at all. She decided that maybe the full motion console didn't have sensitive enough feedback for him to feel it.

As she started again on the next radish, she realized that not only had the potion restored her energy faster than the food, but it continued to boost her replenishment for significantly longer. She wondered how expensive it was.

Danika shredded 32 of her radishes and drank from Aishin's hand half a dozen times before they both heard the faint chime of a skill. Aishin pulled up his menus and announced, "It wasn't mine. I haven't learned it yet."

Danika pulled up her own character sheet to find that her own 'Wind Slash' had gained a level. When the soft chime of a skill rang out again 10 radishes later, she was afraid that it was her 'Impartation' skill leveling up, but instead Aishin announced with satisfaction, "I learned it!"

Aishin targeted the half shredded radish with one of his knives and his cut not only sliced through the radish, but left a groove in his floor. Danika gazed at the deep mark, and then pouted at him.

Aishin reached out and rubbed her ears. It felt amazing and she groaned. The noise came out as a full blown purr, and Aishin laughed at her startled expression. Danika did what any cat would do, she stepped away from him and turned her back on him.

"I'm sorry!" Aishin protested laughingly. "But this skill is even more awesome than I expected! I'll try to let you learn as many of my skills as we can find time for, ok?"

Danika tossed her head, but the game translated it to an ear flick, which felt weird. After a moment she turned back to him and nodded. "That's still really weird," Aishin commented with amusement.

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Two and a half hours later another soft skill chime finally rang out in the little round room. Danika checked her skills and smiled. She'd finally managed to copy Aishin's 'Meditation Enhancement' skill. The description said simply: "Time spent using this skill will slowly increase health and energy capacity."

She wrote a quick message to Aishin, who just sat there and waited for her little bird to deliver it this time. It said: "I learned it! Thanks!"

Aishin flopped back on the floor and said, "Man, that was surprisingly exhausting. I've always considered this a really boring skill, because you just sit there and breathe, but hours of it on this console was kind of rough. I should have switched to my phone. I really need to disconnect from this thing and go sleep."

Thinking of sleep made Danika yawn. Her yawn triggered Aishin's yawn. He chuckled and said, "let's exit so I can stow this place in my inventory."

Danika looked at the pile of shredded radishes from their 'Wind Slash' training.

"I'll clean up later, I promise," Aishin said laughingly.

Danika placed her paw on the center stone and said, "exit," and found herself returned to the human city. It was a little disorienting because she'd entered the stone's room during

the game's night, but they'd stayed in there so long that it was the bright afternoon of the following day.

Aishin appeared beside her a moment later and bent to pick up the dark stone. He ran his hand down her back before saying, "Goodnight ZipZing, at least you're a cute cat while it lasts." He stood, stowed the stone in his inventory, and logged off.

Danika blinked, and logged out too. It had been a very long day.



## ***51: Another Job, Another Quest***

In the morning Danika made faces at herself in the mirror in her bathroom, and scolded aloud, "You should act more like a grown-up and take control of your own gaming schedule." She felt as tired after her day off as she had been while trying to work a regular shift and complete the quest for 10,000 acorns. There were even still shadows under her eyes this morning.

With the new skills ZipZing had learned, her accumulated level was 8 points more than her Karma balance again. If she didn't play "Living Jade Empire" for a week, and just logged on once a day to collect the new login bonus, she'd be caught up. Danika stuck her tongue out at herself in the mirror and admitted that she wasn't going to do that, but she told herself firmly that she'd get more sleep this week.

Despite starting the day out lethargically, she managed to complete her morning exercises and eat something before her grocery delivery arrived. She felt like a squirrel stocking up for winter as she tried to cram everything she'd ordered into the cupboards and chiller that had seemed nearly empty.

She snacked on a plate of vegetables that she'd prepared mostly because the drawer wouldn't shut as she started her next job search. She felt disappointed by the pay offered for most of the small jobs available, and then scolded herself again. The leveling jobs had paid a lot more than usual, and if she started refusing jobs because they didn't pay as much, she wouldn't be working much.

Danika selected a job that barely paid a minimum wage, but looked simple. The poster begged someone to sort and compound their equipment in one of the mobile collection games, and they had chosen one of the more reputable account link sites to hold their account access during the job.

Once she'd accepted and gained access to the account, she could actually see why they were paying someone else to sort it. The person had paid for the maximum inventory space, and apparently played often, but without any kind of organized system. Their inventory was crammed with everything from garbage drops to exclusive items. She began sorting out which items could be compounded to make better items.

Once Danika had a routine going, she propped her phone up beside the screen and opened the "Living Jade Empire" application. She had a message waiting from Logical Heart: "I didn't realize that they interfered with location skills, but it makes sense. Thanks. My guildmate who agreed to sell them in her booth already priced them at 200k. I thought that was crazy, but if you guys agree, that's great."

Danika sent a message to SaltySiamese asking: "What guild are you in?"

She tried logging in to the game to see if the meditation skill was something she could keep going in the background, but discovered that it was almost like a minigame in the mobile version. She had to tap for each breath when the gauge was green. ZipZing was also still a cat and her experience in the elven capital made the busy human capital city feel dangerous, so she logged back out again. Her sorting job needed most of her concentration so she left her phone on the messenger screen and focused on her work.

Aishin sent her a message in the early afternoon, about an hour after she'd stopped

and eaten lunch. She thought there was only a bit more to go on the sorting job, so she was trying to finish it up, but his message made her come to an abrupt halt as she read the two words: "Hello sweetie."

Danika wrote, "Sweetie?" but then erased that and sent back, "Who are you?" instead. She had let him pet her, but he always said hi or hey, not hello, and he always called her by her character name. She didn't think she'd ever heard him use a casual endearment toward anyone yet.

She decided that she was probably overthinking it until the reply arrived: "OMG you're hurting my feelings!"

Danika didn't reply. Another message arrived: "I just wanted to ask you something, are you really a girl?"

Danika huffed a laugh. One of Aishin's friends must have his phone. She replied honestly, but obliquely: "I was still a cat when I checked this morning."

Another message arrived before they'd have had time to read her answer: "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Danika snickered, and replied with a return question: "Why? Don't you have a girlfriend?"

She regretted her flippancy a little when the next reply arrived: "Sorry about that. That's a long lasting spell, maybe we should check that you weren't cursed, but I can't play much for a few days. I don't, but I'm not looking for one either. How did you know it wasn't me?"

The screen in front of her still flashed for attention, but Danika sat and stared at her phone. She was pretty sure her cheeks were flaming red. Finally she tried to answer Aishin's question: "The phrasing? I wasn't certain until they replied with the 'oh my god' abbreviation."

Aishin replied: "LOL, should I start calling you sweetie?"

She knew he was just making fun of her but she replied swiftly: "Please don't."

A simple "Ok" was the last response.

Danika returned her attention to the flashing screen in front of her and scolded herself, "Stop blushing you idiot. He's still just a kid anyway."

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SaltySiamese replied about the time that Danika was submitting the completed sorting job. She finished up before checking it. When she read it her nose wrinkled, it read: "It's funny that you're asking that right now! Until yesterday only Shrubbery had joined a guild, she kept saying how great it was, but none of us wanted to join that gardening club with her. Today the rest of us joined the guild Justin the Grey is in! It's not a big guild, but it's one of the oldest in the game and they still agreed to take us all, even our idiot horse. Cool right?"

Danika replied: "Shrubbery?"

SaltySiamese answered quickly: "Ah, you might remember her as PrincessPrincess? She always says she's still waiting for her knight to take her home? \*eye roll\* I'll tell her to send you a friend request."

Danika made herself do a couple of chores before pulling herself back into the VR-medi pod. She smiled at her sleeping kitten and dragon sticker as she completed the hook up.

ZipZing was still a cat, which meant that in the game she'd already been a cat for almost four days. She checked her character sheet and it still said reassuringly that she was a Fairy Dragon and a Novice.

After thinking for a few minutes, she turned her feet in the direction that she thought the market lay. It was morning in the game, and Aishin had said that the traveling merchant was usually available during the day.

Seeing the world from the perspective of a housecat was interesting. She was also able to leap impressively high and far, which she discovered when someone almost stepped on her. Everyone ignored her, players and NPCs alike.

She actually checked to make sure that she didn't have her stealth skill activated, and then she activated it out of curiosity. She wondered if being a cat made her ignored, would a stealthy cat be invisible? After awhile she decided that if she wasn't invisible, the effect was pretty close. She had to touch someone before they'd look at her. She turned it off again so that at least they would mostly avoid stepping on her.

She leapt up onto a table and then onto one of the taller booths in the market once she arrived, and scanned the area for the traveling merchant. She finally spotted him talking with a couple of players near the center of the market. She leapt down and trotted in his direction.

Unlike all the other vendors in the market, the traveling merchant watched her approach and greeted her cheerfully, "Good morning ZipZing! Your fur is lovely today."

Danika asked, "Can you tell if I'm under a curse or if this will wear off soon?"

The merchant winked at her and replied, "You'd need to ask an enchanter, or someone from a magical path who has the skills to examine enchantments. I might know an enchanter who's been having some trouble with mice?"

"Ordinary mice?" Danika questioned.

The merchant spread his hands and asked innocently, "Would ordinary mice be able to trouble any reasonably competent enchanter?"

Danika huffed a silent laugh and asked, "Where do I find this enchanter then?"

## *52: Cute Shrubbery*

Danika looked back over her shoulder at the traveling merchant after she turned away. She really couldn't tell that he was an NPC sometimes. All of this game's NPCs showed a surprising range of humor and emotion, but he was definitely the most natural to converse with.

She followed his instructions to a narrow side street. A butterfly fluttered up to her and landed on her nose. She blinked and it was replaced by the message it had carried: "Hi? Um, Salty said I should send you a friend request, but I wasn't sure if you'd want that?"

Danika read the message from Shrubbery. She'd sort of forgotten how diffident PrincessPrincess could be, she'd usually been busy blowing things up with her summoned creatures in the last game they'd played together. Danika sent her both a friend request and a reply: "Yeah. I was asking about guilds, and she said you'd been in a guild the longest?"

Shrubbery accepted her friend request, and Danika saw that her location was somewhere in the same city. A moment later she received a party invitation and another message: "I'm in 'The Gardening Club', it's great, but I don't think you'd like it? We mostly grow flowers. Um, if we were in the same party I could navigate to meet up and talk in person? If you don't mind?"

Danika examined the party invitation, the system offered to let her add Shrubbery to the party she already had with Aishin, or to leave her current party and form one with Shrubbery. Danika added her to the existing party, but sent a quick message to Aishin: "I hope you don't mind, I've added an old acquaintance to the party."

The party compass for Shrubbery indicated that she was back in the direction that Danika had just come from. She turned and stepped back into the larger street behind her and pulled up her menu lens to watch for Shrubbery's name on the passers-by. Aishin's little bat showed up with a tiny message first, even though he wasn't logged in to the game so he must have had the first layer of it open on his phone. It said: "Ok :) "

Shrubbery was tall, with a cute face. Danika couldn't guess how much of her brown skin was natural coloring and how much was her Dryad race, but she was sure the green hair with living flowers and leaves growing in it was all Dryad. Her path was actually Gardener, instead of Farmer as Danika had expected. Her accumulated level was barely higher than ZipZing's at 50.

Danika said, "Hi," and then added, "oops, I forgot it's all meows." She pulled her message screen back up.

Shrubbery said, "Hi? I can understand animals. Why do you look like a cat when it says you're a Fairy Dragon?"

"You can?" Danika asked. Shrubbery nodded, so Danika dismissed the message screen and explained, "I ate the apple I got from the wizard in the beginner's vale."

"There was a wizard in your vale?" Shrubbery asked curiously.

"There wasn't in yours?" Danika questioned with surprise.

Shrubbery laughed and said, "When we compared notes, all of us had different NPCs in our vales. But each had three from combat, crafting, and magic paths. Salty thinks that we might be able to find those NPCs again somewhere in the game."

"Speaking of SaltySiamese, weren't you guys in the same party? It just let me add you to this one," Danika commented.

Shrubbery looked away and then said quietly, "Um, we were all playing in the same party, but there's a five person limit, and Salty has been crushing on that wizard. They talk about their cats all the time. Anyway, she and Match have been playing in his party all day. I think Match likes that redhead. And Ranma said he wanted to join a party with a knight to finish his Noble Steed quest."

Danika mentally face palmed. If Justin liked cats that much, no wonder he'd be more likely to accept a request from someone named SaltySiamese. She asked, "Match? Ranma?"

Shrubbery turned back to face ZipZing and chided, "You remember Match, Salty's little brother?"

"Oh, SweetPoison?" Danika asked.

"Oh, you don't have him here? He's MatchlessMinion now. And I don't think you know Ranma. We were all playing that LoveLove Kitty game in the same town and then we met him in person at the last AnimeCon." Shrubbery blushed and added, "He's pretty cute in real life."

"Oh, cool," Danika replied a little blankly. She vaguely remembered an invitation from SaltySiamese to play a mobile game like that the year before, but hadn't realized her whole group had been participating. She told Shrubbery, "I was about to talk to an enchanter that the traveling merchant recommended as being able to tell me if I'm cursed or enchanted and how long it's going to last. Want to come along? Apparently he's been having trouble with mice, so there will probably be some sort of exchange of favors."

"Oh, I don't know if I'll be any help, but sure, if you don't mind?" Shrubbery replied uncertainly.

"I promise I won't ask you to come along for anything if I don't want you to come," Danika replied dryly.

"Sorry," Shrubbery replied, and raised her hands to cover her pink cheeks.

"You're fine," Danika told her comfortingly. She turned and trotted back into the narrow side street where Shrubbery's butterfly messenger had found her.

The enchanter's shop was just as the merchant had described it, and Danika hopped neatly up the steps and then turned and waited for Shrubbery to open the door. Shrubbery grinned at her and said, "Oh, I see."

The shopkeeper addressed Shrubbery first, "If you came for a portal enchantment, go away!"

Danika blinked and checked him through her menu lens. His name was Inchy Antyr and it was NPC yellow. She huffed a silent laugh, apparently even NPC enchanters were tired of enchanting portals.

Shrubbery replied quickly, "No, my friend has been turned into a cat!"

The enchanter pulled a lense out of a pocket and held it up to his eye. It made his eye look enormous, and Danika would have bet that if you looked through a lens like that in the real world, everything more than a few centimeters from it would just be a blur, but he focused on her and said, "Hmm, a cat, how useful. Want to sell her to me?"

Shrubbery objected, "She's not for sale!"

Danika agreed, "I'm not for sale, but I can be bribed?"

Shrubbery turned to stare at her and asked, "Really?"

Danika shrugged and the enchanter asked, "What did the cat say?"

Danika wondered what would have happened if Shrubbery hadn't joined her party. Maybe he'd have pulled out an ear trumpet to understand her with. Shrubbery told the enchanter, "She said that she can be bribed."

### ***53: Competent Enchanter***

Danika whispered to Shrubbery, "How is it that you can understand animals anyway? Does it apply to all animals?"

Shrubbery murmured, "All full blooded animals, it's a gift from my tree."

Danika thought that dryads must be a pretty interesting race, but told Shrubbery, "When he asks what I want, tell him I want to learn the Shape cantrip."

The enchanter obligingly asked, "What does the cat want then?"

Shrubbery asked, "Are you sure Dawnstar, um, I mean ZipZing? Sorry. But didn't you want him to look at the curse or enchantment you're under?"

Danika's cat eyes gleamed as she replied, "I want that too, but I might as well ask for the cantrip as the bribe for dealing with the mice. The evaluation should be available as an ordinary business request from an enchanter, no?"

Shrubbery reported to the enchanter, "She says she wants to learn 'the Shape cantrip' to deal with your mice, and that examining the curse or enchantment is ordinary business?"

"Oh? She knows about those horrible mice already?" Inchy Antyr asked. He eyed ZipZing suspiciously, as though she'd been the one who brought them down upon him.

Danika said complacently, "The traveling merchant told me."

Shrubbery repeated the information for the enchanter, who gazed at ZipZing and asked, "How did you trigger the spell?"

Shrubbery explained as soon as Danika opened her mouth, "She ate an apple she got from a wizard."

"Hmm, hmm," Inchy Antyr muttered, "did you at least save one of the seeds?"

Danika tapped her paw against her storage ring and removed the rest of the yellow apple from her pouch. Shrubbery bent and picked it up, and then handed it to the enchanter, who said, "If you two work on getting rid of those awful white mice while I examine this, then I can give you a ring that will let you cast the shape cantrip a hundred times, but I can't teach it to you as you're not on a magical path. It will be 300 coin for the evaluation."

"Fair enough," Danika agreed.

Shrubbery held up her thumb and said, "agreed."

The two girls looked at each other doubtfully when the enchanter opened a trapdoor in the floor behind his work bench, and indicated that they should use the small ladder to descend into the darkness.

After a moment Danika cast her featherweight spell on herself and jumped down first without touching the ladder, landing lightly on her feet with appropriately cat-like grace. It

wasn't as dark and scary looking from the floor of the large crowded basement. She looked up and called out to Shrubbery, "It's ok! It's just a normal storage area."

Shrubbery climbed down the ladder, and as soon as she reached the bottom the enchanter shut the trap door. Her hair seemed to wilt a little and she said nervously, "I can't see anything, it's too dark."

Danika gazed around the dim, but not dark room with a puzzled frown, and then remembered her night vision. She checked her skills and saw that it was active. She told Shrubbery, "My light cantrip only lasts for six seconds, but let me try my dazzle."

Danika activated her dazzle and Shrubbery said, "Oh, it's like you just became very shiny, I still can't see anything else, but I can see light reflecting off of you."

"Um," Danika looked around to see if there were any candles or lanterns. She spotted a small lamp hanging next to the ladder, far too high for her to reach. She could see the wick, but it was behind glass. She tried casting her light and seeing if it could pass through the glass. The light could, but when she attached her spark to it, it couldn't.

Shrubbery asked, "Do you want me to get it down for you? I can see it fine while your spell lasts."

Danika felt like an idiot. "Yes please, and open its door?" she asked. She cast her cantrip again and Shrubbery gently lifted the lamp down and flicked open its cover. "Thanks," Danika mumbled as she used her spark to light the lamp.

"Haha," Shrubbery laughed, "I'm the one who needs it, thanks for finding it and lighting it." She held up the lamp and both girls surveyed the jumble of crates, casks and shelves stuffed with materials of all kinds.

"I don't suppose the mice are just going to walk out and agree to cooperate," Danika said with a sigh.

Shrubbery giggled. "What would we do if they did come out and offer to cooperate? I can understand animals, but I can't speak to them."

"Oh," Danika replied.

"Cooperate with what?" someone else asked suspiciously. "Hopping into your cat's belly?"

"Ew! I am not going to eat a mouse!" Danika declared.

Shrubbery laughed.

"Well?" demanded the voice.

Shrubbery repeated, "She refuses to eat any mice. She's not really a cat, she's under a spell."

Several hundred small eyes reflected the little lamp's light as little white mice crept out from every dark nook and corner. Danika shuddered. No wonder the enchanter thought that they were horrible. Shrubbery's toes bumped against ZipZing's haunches as she crowded



closer.

Danika straightened her spine, and asked Shrubbery, "Please ask them what they want and why they're suddenly bothering the enchanter."

Shrubbery squeaked, and coughed, and then asked a bit shrilly, "Why are you suddenly bothering the enchanter? What do you want?"

A fatter mouse stepped forward and revealed itself as the previous speaker. "We want to make an enchanted stone that will produce endless cheese."

Danika blinked and said, "Ooh, that would be awesome. Did the enchanter refuse to make them one?"

Shrubbery relayed the question nervously, and the mouse declared, "Hmph, who needs the help of a second rate enchanter like that? We just needed enough supplies for our own team of enchanters to work with!"

"Oh, so you're just thieves," Danika replied sourly.

"I'd rather not repeat that," Shrubbery replied nervously.

A moment later the trap door opened and Inchy Antyr called down, "I can't find anything except the usual healthy Apple enchantment on this apple." He held it out toward them. "Are you sure it was what turned you into a..." his voice trailed off as he actually looked into the basement and saw the hundreds of white mice surrounding the cat and the dryad. The enchanter squeaked, dropped the apple, and slammed the trap door shut. Heavy scraping noises followed shortly.

Shrubbery emitted a nervous tittering laugh.

Danika grumbled, "Yes I am sure." She patted Shrubbery's toes with her paw and said comfortingly, "It's ok. There are obviously other entrances to this place."

"Oh, what makes you so sure of that?" asked a smaller white mouse curiously.

Danika narrowed her eyes at the mouse. "You're here," she replied dryly. "I suppose for a mouse learning to understand cats would be very useful."

The fatter mouse who'd been speaking before said sharply, "Thomas, you idiot."

The voices of a hundred mice erupted as they argued the pros and cons of Thomas revealing that he could understand the cat, explained the situation to each other and offered opinions on the next course of action.

Another mouse was ignoring the tumult and examining the apple the enchanter had dropped. He adjusted his tiny spectacles and pulled various items out of the nearly invisible white pouch he wore. Danika watched the mouse with interest.

Shrubbery complained quietly, "But we won't fit into a mouse hole."

Many of the mice paused their discussions and laughed and pointed at the dryad. Danika didn't reply to Shrubbery, she stood and walked over to the mouse who seemed to

have finished examining the apple. A number of the mice shouted warnings, but the tiny enchanter looked up at her calmly.

## ***54: Golden Messenger***

"What did you find out?" Danika asked the tiny enchanter curiously.

"This apple was grown on a tree that was grafted onto the roots of a pussy willow." The little white mouse pointed to an apple seed that it had removed. It had a covering of gray fuzz that Danika would have called mold, but it was curiously uniform and did make the seed resemble a catkin. "It's quite incredible that its taint had any effect on you, the chance is miniscule," the little white mouse explained.

Shrubbery commented with sudden interest, "It takes a lot of skill and specialized magic to combine different plants. A few of the people in my guild have been trying to produce mixed berry bushes."

Danika was more distracted by the sudden image her imagination provided, of a pussy willow that had actual cats on it instead of catkins. She closed her eyes and shook her head hard enough that her ears made little flapping noises. She opened her eyes again, looked at the tiny enchanter and asked, "How long do you think it will last?"

The little white mouse stroked his chin thoughtfully and speculated, "Perhaps a day per year old the pussy willow was? It's hard to say."

Danika asked, "Any idea how old that kind of tree can get?"

Shrubbery spoke up, "I think most willows only live to be about 75 years old, but they can be grown from a small cutting, so I don't know if that would count as the same tree? I'm sorry ZipZing, I need to hop off for awhile, I'll return as soon as I can."

"Ok, thanks," Danika replied quickly.

As soon as Shrubbery vanished, Danika suddenly became very aware of all of the little white mice watching her again. She stiffened her spine and asked with false casualness, "What ingredients are needed to create a cheese making stone? How long do you all intend to stay here?"

The mice erupted into argumentative discussions again. The little enchanter replied calmly, "We don't know. Many of our enchanters have different theories, so far none of them have produced a successful variation. We came here because we heard that the enchanter who keeps the shop here specialized in enchanted infinity stones."

The fatter mouse who'd first spoken overheard this and spoke up with indignation, "But that second rate enchanter buys most of the stones he sells!" He pointed to the jars that lined the top shelves of the shelf lined walls of the room. Each one held a different color of softly glowing gemstones.

The little enchanter waved his paw dismissively and said calmly, "They are all charged stones anyway, not true infinity stones."

"Why do you need an infinity stone that doesn't produce cheese? Is it a component?" Danika asked.

The little mouse shook his head and explained patiently, with glances toward some of

the other mice, "It's much easier to build an enchantment than to modify one. The written formulas we've acquired have all been flawed though. We need a working example of an infinity stone. Some of the charged stones here that we have examined hold an impressive number of charges, the people who buy them may never discover that they weren't true infinity stones, but they are useless for our purpose."

"If I got an infinity stone for you to examine, would you all agree to leave this place and live somewhere else?" Danika questioned.

One of the other white mice shouted at her, "We don't live here stupid cat! We have our lab!" Other mice immediately joined in, and yet other mice argued things like, "It's not really a cat," and "We've been living here for a week though?"

The fatter mouse came and stood beside the little enchanter. They exchanged a long look and then the fatter mouse nodded and the enchanter told her, "If you could provide a true infinity stone, we would happily agree to avoid this place in the future."

Danika looked at the arguing crowd of mice doubtfully and asked, "Can you really all agree on anything?"

"Probably not," the fatter mouse admitted laughingly.

"But we could create an enchanted contract that would enforce the agreement," the enchanter proposed sensibly.

The fatter mouse nodded.

Danika looked around and said decisively, "Then work on preparing the contract, and when my companion returns I will show you what I believe to be an infinity stone. If it turns out to be a charged stone like these, we'll do our best to acquire a real one for you as soon as possible."

Danika was afraid to pull out the squirrel's aqua stone and show it to the little enchanter right now, because the mice might simply decide to take it and get rid of her. Shrubbery might or might not be an effective combatant, but at least she was much larger. She added as an afterthought, "And if you're successful in crafting an infinite cheese stone, I would be interested in buying one."

"Fair enough," the fatter mouse agreed after exchanging another look with the enchanter.

The enchanter looked at his arguing tribe and sighed. "These mice are so troublesome, I'll build the contract while you inform everyone that they'll have to put a print to it," he told the fatter mouse.

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When Shrubbery finally returned, Danika and the mice were arguing conversationally over what flavor of cheese ought to be used.

Shrubbery asked nervously, "How are things going? Um, it's all dark again?"

"Is it?" Danika looked at the little lamp which had gone out and apologized, "I'm sorry,

it didn't occur to me to save the lamp for you."

The little enchanter spoke up, "Light for your companion is no problem." He reached into his little pouch and pulled out a glowing stone that was bigger than the pouch itself, and asked politely, "Is this enough miss Dryad?"

Shrubbery nodded and replied with uncertain surprise, "It's better, thank you?"

Danika quickly sent the message she'd prepared for Shrubbery. Her little bird gave her a criticizing look as it delivered the note. Shrubbery read the note and then fished a small pouch out of her inventory and handed it to ZipZing.

Danika tapped her storage ring at the same time that she opened the pouch, and pulled out the squirrel's aqua gem. She set the gem down in front of the little enchanter and asked, "Is this a true infinity stone? It has never run out."

The enchanter pulled out a number of tools and a large crowd of small white mice approached. Danika snatched the gem back up. The enchanter gave her an exasperated look, and then turned to the other mice and shouted, "I'll turn anyone who interferes in my examination into a cat for a whole day!"

He turned back to Danika and said firmly, "I give you my word little Dragon that the stone won't be harmed or taken from you until the contract is agreed to."

"Dragon?" "Dragon!" "The cat is a dragon?" The crowd of mice exploded into chatter again. Danika ignored them and replaced the stone. She turned and handed Shrubbery's pouch back to her too.

The little enchanter examined the stone with growing excitement. He double checked it with a variety of tools and looked at it through three different kinds of flames that he conjured. "It's a true infinite water stone!" he declared at last.

The fatter white mouse quickly hustled forward and presented the contract to Danika. "I have forced, I mean everyone has placed their print upon it. As soon as you agree to it, the contract will take effect," he declared.

Danika read the contract carefully, and then waited while Shrubbery read it. The mice had added the clause that she had requested that said if they were successful in crafting the infinite cheese stone, they would contact her and sell one to her for the materials cost. The fatter mouse boasted, "I added the bonus!"

Danika replied politely, "It was very kind of you to offer the likeness of one of your tribe to carry messages. Please allow my party member to select the representative?"

"Certainly! Certainly!" the plump white mouse agreed.

Shrubbery whispered, "Wow! What did you do to them while I was gone? Are you sure it's ok for me to choose?"

"I'll tell you about it later," Danika replied with amusement. "Please do."

Shrubbery carefully examined the little white mice surrounding them. Some of them were trying to hide in the back, while others were bouncing up and down and shouting,

"Pick me!"

After a moment Shrubbery pointed to a small mouse with larger ears than the rest. "Is that one ok?" she asked.

"Sure," Danika agreed. She held up the contract and announced, "I agree." The system popped up several notifications at once and the mice waved farewell and departed like a mist that had traveled on tiny white feet. In mere moments they had all vanished.

The top message announced: "Your party is the first to clear the White Mouse Messenger Acquisition Quest. Congratulations! A golden version of this mouse will also be available to each member of your party."

## *55: Fan Service*

The next system message announced that the new contract was in effect. The mice could no longer visit this building and would offer a cheese stone to ZipZing if it were created. The image of the little mouse Shrubbery had chosen as their new messenger appeared at the end in gold.

The last system announcement read: "5 Karma bonus for achieving a peaceful resolution to the Enchanted Shop's rodent problem using your own resources."

It made Danika feel a little better about giving up the aqua stone. She checked her character sheet and found that she'd received two Karma that the system hadn't specifically mentioned. She wondered if that meant they'd completed two quests, and asked Shrubbery, "How many Karma did you get?"

Shrubbery complained, "They took the light." She pulled up her own menu and reported, "Two. Can we leave now?"

Danika cast her light cantrip for Shrubbery, and suggested, "Try climbing up and knocking on the trap door?" She cast another cantrip the instant the light faded, and pulled the pouch with the last of the radishes out and began crunching on one.

Shrubbery obediently climbed up and knocked. She looked down at ZipZing and asked, "You're just going to sit there and eat?"

Danika cast her light again and replied, "Spells use up a lot of energy."

Shrubbery knocked louder on the door. "Hey!" she yelled. "They are gone!"

Danika gathered up the remains of the apple that had turned her into a cat, including the furry seed. She ate another radish to keep her energy recharging and kept renewing the light for Shrubbery.

Shrubbery commented like Aishin had, "That looks so wrong, cats don't eat radishes."

Danika huffed a silent laugh. "I'm almost out of foods again," she informed the dryad.

As though thinking of him had summoned it, Aishin's little bat appeared with a message. Danika read it while Shrubbery asked, "What did you do to those mice? It's so cool to have the golden mouse messenger, but I feel like I didn't do anything!"

Aishin's message asked similar questions: "Wow! It just notified me that my party was the first to complete the White Mouse Messenger quest! What have you been doing? (And why another mouse quest? Or was it an unfinished ending to the Fairy Mice?)"

Danika wrote back to Aishin while she answered Shrubbery, "I gave them an infinite water stone in exchange for leaving this place. You were totally integral to the plan! I was so afraid that if I admitted I had it on me, that they'd just take it and kill me off, but thankfully I could tell them that my large dryad friend had to return first!" She felt like she exaggerated only a little, but Shrubbery giggled.

Danika's answer to Aishin read: "Well, currently we're locked in the enchanter's

basement. It was a different mouse quest, probably because I'm still a cat. It may last up to 75 game days we think?"

"Dryads don't have any useful power without sunlight," Shrubbery informed her. "If we'd had to fight we'd have been in real trouble."

"Would illusionary sunlight work?" Danika asked curiously as she crunched on the next radish. She stared at the trap door and tried to come up with another plan. She'd told Shrubbery not to worry and that there were other exits, but she'd seen how some of the mice had appeared to walk right into the stone walls the way the slimes had.

Aishin came online a moment later, and Shrubbery replied worriedly, "I don't know. Is that your last radish? You can stop casting until you find the other exit, I'll be ok." Shrubbery knocked loudly one last time and then climbed back down and sat gracefully on the floor.

Danika stopped casting her light and agreed, "I'll focus on finding the exit then." She felt deceitful. She opened up her mouth to admit that she was no longer certain that there was one...

Shrubbery spoke first. "I've always been kind of afraid of dark enclosed places. It goes pretty well with being a dryad since we are sun powered."

Danika's mouth snapped shut and she padded around the perimeter of the crowded room, poking and pulling at the shelves and the walls instead. She had only made one full lap around the room when there were loud voices raised overhead.

Danika looked up hopefully. She recognized Aishin's voice even muffled through the floor. A moment later there was a sharp explosion and Shrubbery squeaked fearfully.

There was a silence after the explosion, and then a scraping noise. A moment later Aishin opened the trap door. He dropped through it without bothering with the little ladder, and Shrubbery gasped and pointed at him. She sputtered incoherently, "It's it's, him, that..."

Danika looked at her and then told Aishin, "I think she recognizes your avatar?" She surveyed Aishin and added, "You go through a lot of clothes don't you?" His face was uncovered and his clothes had shredded spots again.

Aishin grinned at her and replied teasingly, "Meow meow meow?"

Shrubbery whispered shyly, "She said you go through a lot of clothes."

"Only since I met you," Aishin said laughingly. "It makes me think you must want to see more of me and the game is trying to provide."

Danika gazed at him with a slightly horrified look.

"ZipZing?" he asked. "I was teasing?"

Danika babbled worriedly, "What if that's really why? What if it's all because I said your face is pretty? I'm so sorry!"

"Stop," Aishin instructed firmly without asking what she was saying. He knelt and put



his hand on her head. "If that was really all it took, I'd be naked all the time."

"I never said I want to see you naked!?" Danika protested. She turned to Shrubbery who bravely repeated it for her.

"So self-centered," Aishin chided with amusement.

Shrubbery explained quietly, "There are probably millions of girls who want to see that avatar naked."

Aishin looked up at her and asked wryly, "You're a fan?"

Shrubbery waved her hands around a bit before replying, "Ah, I don't know if I'd say fan, I'm not extreme about it, but I do like their music."

Danika closed her eyes and thought how glad she was that she was a cat right now. Her wings would have been flaming. Aishin's fingers moved comfortably over her head and he told Shrubbery, "I love the music. But let's get you two out of here, I really don't have time to play right now."

Aishin scooped ZipZing up and swiftly scaled the little ladder. Shrubbery gulped and followed them up quickly. Aishin set ZipZing down gently and asked, "All good?"

Danika looked doubtfully around the shop. The enchanter was huddled in the farthest corner with a white face. "Well, we'll manage from here," she declared. She gave Aishin a firm nod, and wrote quickly in her messenger screen: "We'll manage. Go do what you need to," she instructed. "And thanks."

Aishin snatched it up as soon as it appeared in the paws of a little golden mouse and read it. Then he winked at her and logged out.

## ***56: A Silver Ring***

Aishin's departure seemed to give Inchy Antyr a bit of his courage back and he stood up and began dusting off his robes. Danika ignored him and surveyed the damage to the shop thoughtfully. Nothing was burned. It looked more like a small tornado had hit, although even then, the things in the corners were undisturbed.

"You owe me for the damage your party member caused with that wind bomb!" the enchanter declared a moment later.

Danika narrowed her eyes at him and snapped, "You mean you owe us for locking a sun powered person in your dark basement with only one small lamp."

Inchy Antyr looked at Shrubbery and asked, "What is your cat trying to say?"

Danika winced, she'd gotten so used to being able to talk to Shrubbery and the mice, and she couldn't message him the way she had messaged Aishin.

Shrubbery straightened her spine and said with surprising firmness, "My friend said that you mean that you owe us! The mice are gone for good, and you still left us locked in your basement. If you had answered my knocks, she wouldn't have had to call for help!"

Danika wondered suddenly if that was true. The contract said it was, but this was supposed to be a repeatable quest.

The enchanter blustered, "Open it up and risk letting those horrid mice into the rest of my place?! Never!"

Shrubbery lifted her chin and repeated, "The mice are gone. You owe us the cantrip ring you promised."

The enchanter demanded, "Where are the bodies then?"

Danika asked Shrubbery, "Should we just tell him I ate them all? Or should we try to explain?"

Shrubbery replied, "Just show him the contract."

"How?" Danika questioned. "It's just a menu item now?"

"Find it in your menus, open it, and click the scroll icon," Shrubbery instructed patiently. "Then it'll ask if you want to pay for a copy."

Danika swiped over to the screen that showed her two active contracts and tapped the little scroll icon in the bottom corner of the mouse contract. A system notification popped up asking if she wanted to spend 1 Karma on a physical copy. Danika winced and asked, "Can't we just tell him that I ate them all?"

Shrubbery raised her hands and dropped them in an exaggerated shrug. "My friend says to tell you that she ate them all," she told the enchanter sourly.

"Like I'll believe that!" Inchy Antyr snapped.

Danika sighed and reached to tap accept, but stopped when the enchanter bent and pulled a crystal ball out of the jumble of items that had been blown off of his counter, brushed it off, and activated it.

A clear image of the basement storage room appeared in the ball. He ran his fingers over it, shifting the view around, zooming in and out. His expression shifted from angry, to incredulous, to hopeful. Finally he asked Shrubbery, "Are you sure you don't want to sell her? She makes a great cat."

"She's not for sale!" Shrubbery exclaimed.

"Fine," Inchy Antyr replied grumpily. He rummaged in the drawers behind him and pulled out a gold ring, flipped it over and read the inscription on the inside and put it back. He opened the next drawer over and pulled out a silver ring, checked its inscription and then laid it on the counter. "There," he stated, "the incantation to activate it is 'figura'." He added sourly, "It won't mould the shape of anything solid, it's just a cantrip."

Danika suddenly told Shrubbery, "Tell him that his merchandise is good enough on its own and to stop telling people he has infinite stones instead of charged stones."

Shrubbery gazed down at her in surprise, but then shrugged, picked up the silver ring, and repeated that to the enchanter.

Inchy Antyr protested angrily, "I do have an infinite stone! I've never lied about any of my items!"

Danika gazed at the enchanter doubtfully. Shrubbery asked helpfully, "What does it produce?"

The enchanter looked away from them and muttered, "Sand."

Shrubbery replied kindly, "I see, that must be very helpful for construction projects." The enchanter looked at her with a rather shocked expression that turned calculating after a moment.

Danika laughed her silent cat's laugh and pulled six frogs teeth out of her old salt sack. "These are to pay for examining the apple, which he didn't do very well, and the damage from Aishin's wind bomb or whatever it actually was," she instructed Shrubbery.

Shrubbery scooped up the little pile of teeth dubiously, laid them on the counter and said, "Even though you didn't examine the apple well, she is giving you these for the fee, and to cover the damages."

When the two girls exited the shop, the enchanter was examining the teeth critically with the lens he'd used when they first arrived. Shrubbery held out the silver ring to ZipZing when they stopped at the corner of the larger street.

Danika looked at it and said, "I feel kind of bad that I didn't ask for anything that you could use. Would it be useful to you?" She thought of the witch and the olives and added, "You can shape and move water or paste with it I think."

Shrubbery blinked and replied, "I guess that sounds useful, but I didn't really do much,

and isn't this what you wanted?"

"You did plenty," Danika argued. "And I just need to see it being cast enough times to learn it, I don't actually need to use it myself."

Shrubbery gazed at ZipZing with wide eyes and asked, "You can learn spells from just having them cast in front of you?"

Danika nodded. "I have a skill that lets me, it usually takes a lot of repetition though," she clarified.

Shrubbery handed her the ring and said firmly, "That's amazing, but keep this until you learn it then, and if there's any charge left after, I'll take it."

"Ok, thanks," Danika replied as she stored the ring.

Shrubbery giggled suddenly and Danika looked up. "I think your friend likes a little more than the music," Shrubbery suggested a little slyly.

"What?" Danika asked blankly.

"Well he, or possibly she I suppose, also bought the voice mod as well as the avatar. They didn't do a really good job on it though, it's really flat and expressionless compared to the real singer talking. His real voice has more of a silvery ring to it don't you think?" Shrubbery blushed and raised her fingers to her cheeks as she added, "I'm embarrassed that I didn't realize it was just a purchased avatar until you said that I probably recognized it though."

"Oh," Danika replied thoughtfully. "His voice has a lot more inflection when he's not using just his phone though?"

"Well, it probably sounds better on a system with more processing power," Shrubbery agreed.

"What band is he from?" Danika asked curiously.

"Do you live under a rock?" Shrubbery questioned in a scandalized tone. She heaved a sigh and said without answering the question, "Sorry, I have to go again. I probably won't have time to play again until tomorrow."

"Ok," Danika replied quickly. "It was good to see you again. Thanks, and remind me to ask more about your guild next time?"

"Sure," Shrubbery replied, and logged off.

Before Danika followed Aishin and Shrubbery offline for the night, she submitted a bug report, although it was more of an inquiry, on the repeatability of the white mouse quest. She included the details of the contract that she'd created with the mice, in case there was some obvious flaw in it that she'd overlooked.

She held her paw over the submit for a long moment, and then went back to the message and added a suggestion: "Perhaps they could now search for the 'right' cheese instead of an infinite stone?" The alarm she'd set for an earlier bedtime popped up, and she

tapped submit and logged out.

## ***57: Contradictory Words***

Danika woke up right before her alarm went off. She did her morning exercises and then took a slightly longer bath than usual. She was eating the last of her berries with some rice cereal before she finally checked her phone.

There was a reply waiting from "Living Jade Empire" tech support: "From the honorable celestial servant of the seventh class, Lin Hao, first among his rank, serving the Jade Emperor in the maintenance of the Living Jade Empire: Thanks for reporting the quest conflict, and the suggestion. Want a job?"

Danika gazed at the message for a long minute, and then sent back: "Sure?"

Her phone rang, and she almost dropped it. When her heart dropped back into her chest, she actually looked at the screen and then answered it. It was her aunt on her mother's side.

"Hi, I'm coming into the city for a conference, so I thought we should go out to dinner tonight while I'm there," her aunt Hati informed her. "Your last message sounded a bit lonely."

"Tonight?" Danika asked.

"Are you busy with something?" Hati asked.

"Um, I can make time," Danika replied.

"Great, I'll make a reservation and send you the details in a bit," Hati told her.

"Ok," Danika agreed without enthusiasm.

"See you tonight," her aunt announced, and then hung up on her.

Danika wondered what about her last message had sounded lonely to her aunt. She'd only mentioned the job she'd worked on and the game.

Another message from the honorable Lin Hao arrived while Danika was browsing for jobs. She was looking for something small, or something that could be done over several days, since going out to meet her aunt would probably use up part of her afternoon as well as her evening.

It read: "From the honorable celestial servant of the seventh class, Lin Hao, first among his rank, serving the Jade Emperor in the maintenance of the Living Jade Empire: Sorry I was joking. You'd have to apply to the tech department normally. If you do apply though, you can tell them I recommended you."

Danika searched for the online application process for "Living Jade Empire" support staff more out of curiosity than any real intent to apply. She already knew that she didn't have the kind of degrees most jobs of that nature required. She answered the short questionnaire that sent her to a technical department application form. She was a little surprised, since degree and certification levels had been part of the questionnaire, and usually ones like it had bounced her out at that point in the past. After gazing at the form for

a minute, she decided that she had nothing to lose, and began filling it out.

She didn't exaggerate her education level, but she did write a long paragraph into the "Other:" field that said: "I have played through a number of older games that would at least give me a player's experience with many of the common bugs and quest chain designs of past games." She included a list of examples, and then added, "I have also acted as a mentor or moderator in these games:" She listed three and gave her account names as well, in case anyone actually cared enough to research it. After thinking for a moment she ended with, "I have also created several competition winning story adventures for NoePets," and included links to those.

She saved Lin Hao's messages for the "Why do you think you'd be a good fit for this department:" field. The last question on the form was, "Do you have access to a stable VR connection?" Danika checked "Yes" and submitted the form.

Danika gave up on finding a job to work on for the day when the reservation information from her aunt arrived. She'd scheduled it in-between when Danika usually ate her lunch and her supper, at an expensive restaurant on the other side of the city.

Danika compared the available methods of transportation and eventually decided that if she left early enough, the city's public transportation was the least expensive and would get her about as close as anything else, since the area right around the restaurant was a shopping district restricted to foot travel. She wondered if part of the reason the place was so expensive was that supplies had to be carried in by hand.

She dressed up somewhat. Her best clothes currently were all black, which she knew her aunt regarded as fit for only weddings and funerals. She hesitated in front of the mirror with the bag that held her small supply of makeup, and then put it back. She still remembered her aunt's strict lecture about how inappropriate makeup was for people her age a couple of years ago.

Even though Danika left almost two hours early, several delays and the long winding path up the hill, resulted in her arrival only ten minutes before the reservation time. Her aunt was waiting near the doors of the restaurant.

Danika was uncomfortably conscious of the sweat that damped her clothes here and there. As her aunt solicitously opened the door for her, Danika reminded herself sharply that her aunt was probably only being considerate and not condescending.

Her aunt Hati said critically, "Aren't you getting a little plump?"

Danika sighed and replied, "My weight is not even a whole kilogram more than it was two years ago, when you told me that girls my age shouldn't be dieting."

They were led to their table by a petite young woman who nervously rearranged the chairs for them, dropped their menus at their places and then fled. Danika kind of wished that she could follow the girl, especially after her aunt's next comment.

Hati examined her face across the table and told her niece, "You should try wearing a little makeup and dressing up more when you come out to a nice place."

Danika wanted to protest, "That's not fair!" or "That totally contradicts what you said before!" but she refrained. She suddenly recalled "The Way of the Cat" on ZipZing's

character sheet and the line that said, "Everything is deserved except for that which deserves a swift revenge."

Danika replied with saccharine sweetness, "I hadn't realized that makeup was supposed to gradually increase in quantity as we age. I'll try to follow your excellent example in the future."

Hati blinked at her and then narrowed her eyes. She didn't reply though, she simply picked up her menu, browsed it briefly and then set it down again while Danika was still struggling to interpret the ingredients in the pasta dishes.

"The wild salmon on the daily special looks good," Hati suggested.

Danika glanced at it, it didn't even list a price but said that it was topped with pears stuffed with blue cheese. She tried not to make a face and reminded herself of another line from the way, "Indifference is as sharp as the claw that slits the belly."

After she finished calmly reading the menu, Danika said, "I think I'd rather have the Cascade Sushi roll, if you don't mind." That one was still at least ten times what she'd pay for a meal at home, but at least it listed only things that she liked in its mix.

"Of course, have whatever you like," Hati encouraged her agreeably.

After they'd placed their orders, Danika asked with honest curiosity, "What made you say that I sounded lonely? I haven't been feeling lonely."

"You only mentioned work and games, nothing about having people in your life," Hati replied in a scolding tone.

"I've been playing with both an older friend and a new friend lately," Danika said.

"I mean real people," Hati clarified.

Danika replied sharply, "Everyone is real."

Hati replied just as sharply, "People can pretend to be anything online. It's not real."

Danika's jaw dropped and she stared at her aunt. "Are you kidding me?" she questioned after a moment.

Hati frowned at her and replied seriously, "Of course not, I'm worried about you."

Danika took a deep breath and began what she knew was going to sound like a rant, but needed to be said. "Being able to change your appearance or even gender online doesn't matter, people are still real. If you were afraid to change how you look, you wouldn't wear makeup. I think it's actually more honest than real faces, because you get to see how people really want to look, which can tell you a lot about them."

"I'm not just talking about appearances," Hati snapped. "People lie about who they are!"

Danika's jaw tightened. She replied as calmly as she could, "The people who will lie to you in a game are pretty likely to lie to your face too. That doesn't make them less real. The



people who will drop everything to come rescue you in a game are usually the same kind of people who would drop everything to rush you to the hospital if you needed it."

Her aunt opened her mouth but Danika overrode her reply and finished, "The people who make time for you are people who care about you, no matter where you are spending that time together." She wasn't being hypocritical, she understood that her words applied to her aunt as well.

Her aunt seemed to be aware of that as she replied after a moment, "I am very glad that you made time to come out to dinner with me, even though we always seem to find things to argue about."

Danika gave her aunt a tight smile, and nodded.

Hati sniffed and quoted the old adage, "Oh well, sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me."

Danika grinned a real grin at her aunt and told her, "I could argue that too."

"I dare you," her aunt replied.

"Humans are the only creatures who will cross the entire world because of a single word from the right person at the right time, and the only ones who will die because of a single word from the wrong person at the wrong time. The whole purpose of words is to convey feelings and ideas and that can definitely bring you as much pain as joy," Danika explained wryly.

Hati surprised her by laughing and agreeing, "Ok, you win! I think you're probably right, but the point of that old saying is that you shouldn't let everything anyone says hurt you."

"I know," Danika agreed with a smile.

## *58: Status Games*

When Danika finally returned to her little apartment, she was very tired. She looked at the view from her doorway and decided that it was probably just as well that her aunt had met her at a restaurant instead of coming to see her place. She'd probably have been shocked by how small the room was, the lack of chairs, and how much of that space the VR-medi pod was taking up.

A few minutes later she slid into her tub and took another bath to wash off the strange fragrances that seemed to cling to her skin. There had been food odors at the restaurant, smokers at the stops, and all of the perfumes and colognes that other people seemed to drench themselves in.

After her bath she debated between logging in to "Living Jade Empire" and watching an episode. After a minute she decided to watch the episode with the game open on her phone.

She paused the episode at the end of the intro, and had ZipZing follow a sort of rising path that she found, where raised flower beds beside the street conveniently butted up against a low entry way that was close enough to a balcony to jump from. From the balcony she could use her claws to climb a decorative banner, and from there she could reach the rooftops. Danika positioned ZipZing's little cat form so that she was looking out across the street like a decorative figure mounted atop the gable.

She started the meditation skill and resumed her episode. After a bit of practice Danika found that she didn't need to spend as much attention on the meditation mini game as it had seemed at first. It was very rhythmic and she was able to focus most of her attention on the story. She had the sound on her phone turned down and didn't really notice the two soft skill chimes that rang out a while later.

When her episode finished Danika turned off the screen and looked down at her phone. Two other cats had appeared within her view while she hadn't been paying attention. One lounged on the edge of the balcony, and the other was seated on the step in front of the building across the street.

Danika moved ZipZing down to the balcony. Navigating the world as a cat was much easier than flying through the mobile interface. It used the same simple controls as walking, but ZipZing would neatly leap obstacles and seemed to be able to balance safely on anything big enough to target as a destination.

The balcony cat shifted its gaze to watch her as she approached, but otherwise maintained an air of indifference. Danika initiated a dialogue with it and said, "Hi?"

A notification popped up and then vanished on its own a moment later. It had read: "Status dropped to zero."

Danika blinked and the cat replied grudgingly, "What do you want?"

The two suggested responses were: "To be the king!" or "To learn how to increase my flexibility?" Danika actually hesitated before choosing to ask how to increase ZipZing's flexibility. She was really curious about whether or not there was really a king of cats in the game now.

The cat got to its feet and stretched without answering. It turned and gracefully leapt up onto a nearby window ledge, and then, like Aishin bouncing off of one of his throwing stars, bounded neatly over to a decorative projection that Danika wouldn't have dared to consider a landing spot and across the gap to the lowest edge of the next roof. It turned back, flicked an ear at her, and trotted off.

Danika belatedly realized that maybe she was supposed to have been following it. She jumped ZipZing over to the window ledge. No matter how she zoomed in she couldn't seem to target the little decoration that the cat had used as the intermediate point between the window ledge and the roof. She thought that the cat across the street looked like it was laughing at her.

Danika scrunched up her face in thought. After a minute she cast her featherweight on herself and simply leapt straight for the roof edge. ZipZing landed neatly on the edge of the roof, but then slid backward on the slick tile. Danika gasped and pressed ZipZing forward. Her little cat avatar scrambled for purchase until Danika activated her claw attack in her frantic tapping. Her claws caught in the edges of the tiles and she was able to climb up to the flat line of the roof peak.

Danika shifted her view to look back. The other cat was definitely laughing at her. The cat from the balcony was nowhere in sight. She glanced at the time and hesitated, but then resisted the temptation to keep playing, and logged off.

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In the morning Danika found an evening shift available with the place she'd worked on the 20 accounts with, so she rushed through her morning routine and pulled herself back into the VR-medi pod to play for a few hours before the shift started.

ZipZing was still perched at the peak of the slick tiled roof. After looking around for a moment Danika sighed and activated her wings. It wasn't that she wasn't glad to be a fairy dragon again, but she felt like she'd been interrupted in the middle of something.

She calculated, and decided that she'd probably been a cat for about 13 of the game's days. Somehow a 13 year old magical tree hybrid sounded appropriate for that elven wizard's garden. A little golden mouse scampered along the roof peak carrying a message strapped across its back.

Danika felt a twinge of disappointment that she didn't want to admit to when she saw that the message was from Shrubbery. It read a bit like one of SaltySiamese's messages with an exclamation mark on every sentence: "Wow! It didn't seem like you even played yesterday! But now this morning you're already higher level than I am!"

Danika blinked and tapped over to her character sheet. She'd gained a point in 'Meditation Enhancement' and also one in the previously zero point skill called 'Poise'. She tapped it and discovered that it had also gained a short description: "The maintenance of grace, balance, and equilibrium can boost status."

She tapped the 0 point Status skill, but it remained silent. She remembered the notification that had flashed up about it dropping to zero, which implied that at some point it had been above zero. It made her feel very curious.

After a moment she swiped back over to her messages and sent: "Yeah, I played for a bit on my phone at the end of the night. I'm surprised to see you so early, no school?"

Her own little golden mouse carried the message off and vanished over the edge of the roof, and Danika suddenly missed the little default bird with its sarcastic deliveries. She searched the menu to see where the setting was, since she was pretty sure that she should at least also have a white mouse available.

A reply from Shrubbery arrived, delivered by her little golden mouse with a sharp scolding squeak. Danika blinked at the mouse and then read the message: "None of your business."

## *59: Of Mice and Gardens*

Danika wrote back: "True. Sorry about being too nosy." Her little grey bird bobbed its head in greeting as it took the message and flitted cheerfully off with it.

Danika turned and flew toward the market. On her way there, Shrubbery's golden mouse dropped out of the sky holding tightly to a feather and passed her its message on its way down. Danika laughed and hovered a moment as she read: "Sorry I'm just tired. It's been a week in the game since I tended my garden and it relaxes me to work on it, so that's what I'm doing this morning. You guys are welcome to come visit it if you want."

Danika swiped over to her friend list and saw that everyone except SaltySiamese was currently logged in to the game. Seeing Logical Heart's name reminded her that she needed to either earn another 10,000 coin or sell the Black Datura seed she'd gotten from the fox. It seemed a shame to sell a rare seed in order to buy her garden space though, kind of like those stories about people selling their hair to buy a gift and receiving a gift designed to be worn in their hair.

She looked at Aishin's compass and followed it, only to find him a moment later, apparently following his own screens to her. Aishin looked up as she descended to his level and flashed her a smile. "Hi," Danika greeted him.

"Aw, you aren't a cat anymore," Aishin complained.

"But at least I can just talk to you directly," Danika pointed out.

He flashed her another grin and agreed, "Yeah, that's definitely an advantage."

"I thought you weren't going to have time to play for a few more days?" Danika asked. Then she realized that it was basically the same question she'd asked Shrubbery, except she hadn't mentioned school, so she added quickly, "I'm glad to see you though."

"There were some delays, so I'll be extra busy later, but I've got a little while free for now," Aishin informed her. "I should avoid combat though, I might have to leave suddenly."

"Ok," Danika agreed. "Shrubbery said she's working on her garden this morning, and that we're welcome to visit?"

Aishin gave a short laugh and said, "It's almost sunset."

Danika looked up at the sky and then commented, "That's kind of disorienting sometimes."

Aishin nodded and then Danika turned to orient herself to Shrubbery's compass. She was facing a building. Aishin asked, "Have you been there before?"

"No," Danika replied.

"Ask her if we should use the North or the West gate, and which town or village is nearest?" Aishin suggested.

Danika sent her little bird off with the request, but then glanced at Aishin and asked, "I

thought you could track people."

"We can find her," Aishin agreed, "but I didn't tag her."

"Did you tag Logical Heart?" Danika questioned.

Aishin nodded. Danika gave him a look, and he winked at her. After a moment she asked, "Have you tagged me?"

"No, but good idea," Aishin replied and flicked something almost invisible at her through his menu. Her evasion triggered automatically and she dodged it, but it hit anyway. Nothing seemed to happen and she looked at him. He flashed a grin at her.

Shrubbery's little golden mouse arrived and held up its message. Danika dropped down to take it and the mouse scampered off. The people around them pointed and commented on the gold messenger while Danika read: "It's just inside the walls of the city. The closest landmark is probably the Koi ponds."

One of the nearby players approached and asked, "Do you know where your friend got that mouse messenger? It's from one of the new repeatable quests right?"

"Yeah," Danika agreed. "It was from helping a group of mice find something to help them build an infinite cheese stone."

"A mischief of mice," Aishin corrected. When both Danika and the other player turned to him with confused looks, he added with a grin, "That's what a group of mice is called."

"Where were they?" the player questioned.

Danika replied uncertainly, "They were at an enchanter's shop here in the human capital, but I'm not sure that they'll appear in the same place again."

--

Aishin led Danika to the Koi ponds as sunset fell. It was a rather enchanting view with the soft red light enhancing the colors of the koi and tinting the lilies, but when she looked at the large pale lily blossoms Danika couldn't help but remember the rotting turtle in the frog swamp, and it kind of spoiled it all.

A few minutes later they found Shrubbery's garden. Danika flew into the low walled garden and gasped in amazement. As night was falling the garden was lighting up. She followed her party compass right up to the tree in the center of the garden, but still didn't spot Shrubbery. "Hello?" she called out. "We're here?"

"Oh," Shrubbery replied. "Just give me a moment to finish energizing my jasmine and I'll come out."

"Sure, take your time," Danika agreed. She couldn't see any building or anything for Shrubbery to come out of, but her voice sounded very close. "Your garden is amazing!" Danika added with enthusiasm. "Do you think I could get the seeds of some of your flowers when I start my little garden space?"

"You're starting a garden somewhere?" Shrubbery asked curiously.

Aishin asked suddenly, "How did you afford a garden in the city?"

Danika answered Shrubbery first, "I hope to if everything works according to plan at least."

Shrubbery answered Aishin, "I didn't buy it, but I started this character right after the game opened, and this is where it placed my tree. The latest dryad to join our guild was placed out in the farmlands between villages, and I've only met one other who had a tree within the capital city, and she moved hers to her farm as soon as she could afford one." She asked Danika, as she stepped out of her tree, "You were serious when you asked about my guild?"

Danika and Aishin were both staring at her. She'd stepped out of the trunk of her tree as though it had been an illusion. Danika zipped forward and touched the tree. It felt like a normal tree, but when she pulled up her lens and looked at it, it said: "The Gardener's Tree: Level 50, Health good." When she tapped on it, it expanded to read: "A dryad's tree. In late spring after leaves have formed, flowers bloom with four slender white petals. When the summer sky calls, the seeds take flight. Wrapped snug beneath a soft coat of snow, its sap runs sugary and slow. Identification: Flowering Ash. Sometimes mistaken for an Elder Nimble Tree when occupied."

Shrubbery asked, "ZipZing?"

Danika turned back to her and replied, "Yeah, I mean, don't know that I'll want to join it, but if you don't mind telling me more about it I'd like to hear more. SaltySiamese said that you told her it was great."

Shrubbery tilted her head in thought and then said, "I think we're about half farmers and gardeners as far as paths go. Most of our guild quests are to grow rare fruits or flowers. Everyone is really good about helping each other out."

"Do you have to be a farmer or a gardener?" Danika asked with a frown.

"No, we also have a couple of witches, and there's no rule about it," Shrubbery assured her.

## ***60: A Common Pain***

"What are the rules like?" Aishin asked. "My guild's three rules are that you can't take a contract out on a current member, you can't reveal who hired you, and you can never break a contract you've accepted." He added, "And it's not official, but while it's ok if you decide to leave, if you get kicked out you might as well reincarnate as a new character."

The two girls gazed at him for a moment. Aishin shrugged and Shrubbery replied, "I guess our rules are just um, not so extreme sounding. Always be respectful to each other, try to participate in at least one of the guild specific quests per week, and members need to have at least three plant related skills."

"Oh," Danika said. "I only have two so far."

"Are you really not going to choose a path?" Shrubbery asked.

"Yeah, since it's possible to play an open character who can learn anything, I'm pretty sure I want to stick with this. I'm actually learning skills pretty quickly I think?" Danika replied.

"You really are," Shrubbery agreed. "Salty said you were only level 39 a week ago and now you're above me at 51."

Danika glanced at Aishin who had only gained 3 in his accumulated level since they'd met and asked, "Well, it slows down as your skills level up right?"

"Generally," Aishin agreed. "Plus it isn't like a higher accumulated level gains you anything, it just means it's more expensive to revive."

"Oh, that's true," Shrubbery agreed. "I've already had to revive 3 times. It's kind of amazing that your reincarnation level is still zero ZipZing."

Danika laughed and told her, "I've come really close to having to revive at least three times now." She admitted a bit ruefully, "I probably owe Justin for that apple."

"Justin?" Aishin asked.

"That high level wizard who likes cats so much," Shrubbery answered when Danika hesitated.

Danika changed the subject and asked, "Is your tree sick? Or injured? It said its health is good instead of excellent?"

"Oh it's fine, it'll recharge within a few hours. It's just because I was transferring energy to boost the growth of my new night blooming jasmine," Shrubbery explained and pointed to the delicate flowers that turned out to be the source of the sweet scent that dominated the garden.

Shrubbery sighed and made the motion of dismissing a screen. "I need to go again," she said bitterly.

"Um, I know this is another nosy question, and you don't have to answer at all! But



um, is everything alright?" Danika questioned.

Shrubbery sighed again and said, "I'm sorry I don't want to go into a lot of detail, but I'm not mad that you're asking. It's just that my mom is dying."

Danika stared at her and struggled to find something to say. "Really?" sounded so disbelieving, "Sorry," sounded too short, and "Oh my god that's horrible," was too much.

Aishin replied first, "That's rough. Thanks for being willing to tell us even that much. Take as much time as you need."

"Yes," Danika agreed quickly.

Shrubbery looked at ZipZing and said, "I know this is an awful thing to say, but I feel like you were so lucky to lose your mom suddenly instead. I hate this horrible slow decline!"

Danika stared at her open mouthed for a moment, and then gulped and said, "I don't know. Maybe it was, I can't imagine what you're going through."

Aishin spoke up suddenly, "I can. I lost my mom to cancer when I was nine."

Shrubbery and Danika turned and stared at him. After a minute Shrubbery apologized, "I'm so sorry. I just, I haven't been able to talk about this and felt like I was the only one. I'm sorry."

Danika replied, "It's ok. I totally understand that feeling."

"It was a long time ago now," Aishin told Shrubbery, then he turned and looked at ZipZing. He flashed a sudden grin and said, "This is not what I was expecting us to have in common."

"What?" Danika and Shrubbery both asked.

"Losing our mothers," Aishin replied.

"Oh, yeah," Danika agreed.

Shrubbery winced and said quickly, "Thanks for listening. Sorry. I'm going to go look in on her again."

"Ok," Danika replied. She couldn't think what else to say.

Aishin said quietly, "Don't forget to eat and drink something."

Shrubbery nodded and logged off.

Danika stared at the spot she'd been, and after a long moment Aishin asked, "You ok?"

"I'm fine," Danika replied quickly. "I just wish I could have thought of something kinder to say. I feel like I haven't been a very good friend, I had no idea, I never even asked how she was lately."

Aishin replied thoughtfully, "She doesn't think badly of you ZipZing, just being yourself is enough. I'm a little envious. She obviously trusts you so much."

"What do you mean?" Danika questioned.

"She said something so horrible to you, without expecting you to snap at her, or unfriend her, or anything," he said quietly.

"She didn't mean it to be horrible," Danika protested.

"She did," he refuted. "She said it was an awful thing to say, and it was, and she still said it to you. Even if she's hurting, that's a horrible thing to do to someone ZipZing. Take it from this senior, I know."

Danika shrugged uncomfortably. She couldn't really deny it. Her wings were shedding muted violet and blue sparkles. "This senior?" she asked doubtfully instead.

"Do you think you're older than I am?" he questioned.

She gave him a firm nod.

He flashed her another grin and said, "I bet you aren't."

Danika sighed and replied, "I'm pretty sure I am, but that's ok, you're definitely my senior in this game."

"How old are you?" he asked curiously.

"I don't want to answer that," she said uncomfortably.

He tossed another short laugh at her. "Want to kick her from the party?" he asked suddenly.

"What? Why?" Danika asked.

"Because it hurt you," he suggested. "I'll kick her if you want." He looked at her face and added, "You don't even have to ask me to, if you don't answer, that's enough."

"No!" Danika protested. "Even if it's uncomfortable, I don't want to hurt her even more!"

Aishin smiled at her, and then reached out suddenly and pinched her cheeks.

"Hey!" Danika protested.

"You're really too cute you know?" he informed her.

"How can you even pinch my cheeks like that when you're playing on your phone?" Danika questioned.

Aishin laughed and replied, "Easily. It's just a targeted emote." He pinched her cheeks again and added abruptly, "This is fun. I wish I could keep you around forever."

She just stared at him for a moment. "Don't joke like that," she said uncertainly. "I'm not a toy."

"I'm not joking," he replied quickly.

Danika frowned at him, but then she grinned and asked teasingly, "Oh really? Want to be my familiar then?"

Aishin asked, "What?"

## ***61: Familiar Question***

Danika's wings finally lost their blue tint and sparkled pink as she replied, "It's part of casting the familiar spell. You make this promise to bond with the familiar forever and their lifespan, health, and energy double in exchange for letting you borrow their skills and senses. But I was just joking. We'd lose health if we didn't see each other every day."

"Every day, or every day in the game?" Aishin asked quickly.

"I don't know?" Danika replied with surprise. "It takes this huge list of rare ingredients too."

"Aren't you underestimating me too much?" he asked. "I know we met after I'd died three times in a row and I've been pretty much out of resources, but I can collect whatever you need to cast it. We just need to find out if it's every day or 4 times a day, because I could manage every day, even if it was just minute from my phone, but not every game day."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied with a grin, "if it's only once a day, I'd love to be your familiar. Seriously, wouldn't anyone for double health and energy? And you could use any of my skills? Are you sure it works on players?"

"Well, it brought up a dialogue to accept or decline when it was cast on me," Danika pointed out.

"Ack, I have to go," Aishin said and logged out.

Danika blinked and stared at the spot he'd been. She couldn't quite believe that he'd just agreed to become her familiar. She blushed again. After a moment she assumed the pose and swiped over to the forums to see if anyone had posted about whether it was per real day or a game day that you had to interact with your familiar.

There was a surprising amount of information about familiars, and Danika got distracted by the differences between witches and wizards when she read that it was only a second tier spell for witches, but a third tier for wizards. She'd somehow assumed that the titles were gender versions of the same path. But actually witches were more like apothecaries, dealing with plants and potions, and wizards were primarily spell casters. Both paths had quite a bit of overlap, along with illusionists and enchanters.

Danika messaged Aishin: "The information on the forums makes it sound like they lose a bit of health every game day, but people say that as long as you log in and feed your familiar and yourself once a week it's not a problem." Then she zipped out of Shrubbery's garden and headed back to the market area.

Danika crossed the market and headed straight for the portals. She flew up to each portal in turn, tapped it, and then declined to pay the fee and be transported. The portals seemed to be arranged somewhat like the game's map, with the elemental cities at the cardinal points. The elven city was northeast of the center and the dwarven city was to the southwest.

After a bit, a player stopped and asked her curiously, "What are you doing? All of the portals cost the same amount now, and none of them are going to be free to use."

Danika replied, "I'm looking to see if there's one for a place called Windbur."

The player replied with disgust, "Newbie. Just use your menu lens," and walked off.

Danika felt a little insulted. She'd been playing for almost a month now, and felt like she was pretty comfortable with the game's mechanics, but when she pulled up her lens to view the portal in front of her she had to admit that they'd been right. Her tactic had been silly, because through the lens each portal was clearly labeled.

The center portal didn't list a specific city, it was labeled "The Portal of Return". Danika tapped the label and a description popped up: "Return to any portal you've previously teleported through."

Danika spun slowly and scanned the rest of the portals that she hadn't touched yet. None of them were labeled "Windbur".

Danika flew back to the market, which was less crowded during the game's night, but definitely not deserted. Most of the vendors she could see now appeared to be players though. After a minute she chose a quiet looking table that appeared to be selling candy.

The vendor was a human girl named "Grandma-Girl", and her Guild was called "Purple Hats". Danika wasn't sure without looking it up, but she thought that the guild name was a reference to having fun because you were old.

Grandma-Girl's avatar looked like she was about 16, but when she spoke her voice was more mature. "Wow! A fairy dragon. I'm still saving up to reincarnate as a fairy. Did you play the beta?" Grandma-Girl asked.

Danika smiled and replied, "No, I earned the Karma for my character through submitting old game accounts."

Danika bought several fruit flavored candies before asking, "Have you heard of a city named Windbur?"

Grandma-Girl shook her head and replied cheerfully, "No, but after awhile I decided that combat didn't suit me, so I haven't done much adventuring. The game really does seem to live up to its promises of customized quests though. As soon as I admitted that killing creatures wasn't fun at all, it started offering me crafting path quests. After I decided that I was having much more fun crafting than fighting, I was able to meet a Sage and change my path."

"That's awesome," Danika enthused.

Before she could ask anything else, SaltySiamese's messenger cat appeared and dropped its message with a disdainful look. The message declared: "You are a horrible friend!"

Danika checked, and SaltySiamese still wasn't logged in to the game. After a moment she replied with: "What's wrong?" As her bird flitted off, she guessed that it was probably something to do with Shrubberty.

Grandma-Girl commented, "That is one thing I don't like about this game."

Danika looked up at her with a puzzled expression and asked, "What?"

"The messenger animals are so obtrusive, there's no such thing as private messaging," she complained, "and all of the magical communication devices use voice, so anyone can listen in."

"No one can read your messages though?" Danika pointed out.

"But everyone knows that you're communicating," Grandma-Girl fussed.

SaltySiamese's cat returned with a much longer message, and as Danika opened it she told Grandma-Girl, "I guess so, but I think they're cute." The cat flicked an ear at her as it stalked off.

The message read: "You were the first one to get a messenger quest and you didn't even invite me and the brat to go with you! (Thanks for inviting Shrubbery though! She's been going through some stuff and having that exclusive golden mouse makes her really happy!) Also Shrubbery said that you were turned into a cat and neither of you even sent me a screenshot!!"

Danika laughed, and Grandma-Girl asked with interest, "They sent you something amusing?"

Danika grinned at the young-old woman's inquisitiveness and replied cheerfully, "My friend is scolding me for not sending her a screenshot of when I was turned into a cat, but I can't afford the Karma to unlock it."

"I know! Can you believe that they charge 50 Karma to unlock the ability to save screenshots?" Grandma-Girl exclaimed questioningly.

Danika smiled and replied, "At least it doesn't cost real money."

Grandma-Girl huffed and replied, "It would be ok if you could purchase Karma for money, but they don't even provide that!"

Danika raised an eyebrow and pointed out, "At least they just added a free point everyday?"

"That's true," Grandma-Girl replied more cheerfully. "It's probably just a matter of time until they add Karma purchasing too."

Danika just smiled and waved a farewell as she flitted off. She kind of hoped that Karma didn't become a commercial currency, and she didn't want to argue about it with the woman.

## ***62: First Snow***

Danika found a quiet rooftop in a small plaza with a fountain and wrote another reply to SaltySiamese: "Sorry, I haven't unlocked screenshots. If I ever turn into a cat again I'll try to let you know so we can meet up. I had no idea it was a messenger quest until it was completed. Have you heard of a city called Windbur?"

She checked the time, and she still had a few minutes before her shift started. She zipped down to the fountain and spent the last of her game session learning to use the Shape ring to mold the water into temporary balls and rolling them around like marbles or throwing them back into the fountain like water balloons. She tried attaching a ball of water to her light the way she could attach her spark, but instead of being able to move the water, the light particles spread themselves out into the same ball shape.

The last thing she tried was targeting her light cantrip directly with the Shape ring. It was kind of a waste because the shape cantrip the ring cast had a 30 second duration, compared to the 6 seconds that her light had, but the light particles did arrange themselves into the shape more easily than if she aligned each particle individually.

--

Danika was kind of glad that she'd taken the evening shift when it started to snow late in the afternoon. The fluffy flakes were a distraction, and her efficiency dropped a little, but seeing the first snow of the year felt worth it.

She decided that after her shift ended, she'd go outside for a bit if it was still snowing. She remembered one of the ingredients from the familiar spell, and grinned. It was too bad that she wouldn't be able to carry a flake from reality into the game.

Danika had two messages when she took a break to eat her supper. SaltySiamese sent: "A cat never accepts excuses! You must endure the weight of my scorn until I see your little furry face for myself! Thinking of that, I haven't even gotten to see your fairy dragon yet! I haven't heard of Windbur, but I'll ask around. Let's meet up soon!"

Danika laughed and said quietly, "The way of the Cat didn't mention anything about scorn or excuses." She replied: "Sure. I'm between quests at the moment, but I told myself I'd maintain a more reasonable schedule so since I'm working an evening shift today, I probably won't play again until tomorrow."

The other message was from Aishin. Danika smiled as she read: "Ok! Send me a list of the ingredients! It's snowing here, if you send me your number or contact name, I'll send you a photo. :) No pressure if you don't want to."

She wrote back: "It's snowing here too, it's beautiful. Sorry, I'd rather not. I'm on my break and not logged in to the game right now, but I'll try to send the list soon."

A minute later Aishin sent back: "Ok :) "

--

It had stopped snowing the fat fluffy flakes after only about an hour, but after her shift finished Danika scooted up close to her window and pushed one of her houseplants aside

enough that she could see the street below. There was still a layer of snow, and tiny flakes sparkled as they tumbled through the beam of light from the streetlight.

After a minute she moved over to her closet and burrowed into the back of it to get out the storage bag that held her winter clothes. It was probably past time to sort her closet for the seasonal change, but she just left the bag lying beside the closet, pulled on her warmer things, and hurried down to the street.

Danika looked around the deserted street and then laughed and held out her hands to try to catch a snowflake on her palm the way a little kid would. It was like trying to catch mist, her hands got slightly damp without catching anything that stayed long enough to see, and swiftly grew painfully cold. She tucked them under her arms and just watched the snow for awhile.

The tiny sparkling flakes reminded her of the sandman's dreams in "Living Jade Empire". They were also similar to sand in the way they were slowly softening the prints other people had left behind in the deeper snow earlier in the day. The dry little flakes shifted with every little breeze creating soft drifts.

Even though she'd bundled up, she was too cold to stay out very long. Even so, when she looked back from the doorway of her building, the two parallel tracks she'd left on her way back in cut sharply across the soft traces of the tracks she'd left on her way out. The fine snow was building up more quickly than it appeared, and she was kind of glad that she'd restocked her foods. There might not be many places willing to deliver in the morning if the snow continued.

Danika looked at the bag of winter clothing when she returned to her room. She sighed as she stripped out of her outer layers and laid them out to dry. Then she scooted over and started pulling out her lightest clothes and folding them neatly, while hanging her sweaters and heavier clothing in their places.

She was yawning when she pulled herself into the warm confines of the VR-medi pod to sleep. After a moment's thought, she logged into "Living Jade Empire" before she fell asleep. She was still in the little plaza where she'd stopped to write messages and play with the shape cantrip earlier.

The little fairy dragon yawned, and then huffed its breath attack out in a small cloud. She stepped forward into it and the Sandman popped up and said laughingly, "You called?"

Danika nodded and told him, "I'd like to dream about going sledding!"

He twirled his hat and winked. "Certainly my dear, let's have some fun!"

Danika gasped as the ground dropped out from under her and she fell into the sled that whisked her down a glittering slope. She was still grinning when she fell into a real sleep a while later.

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Danika woke up with a smile and stretched the way she imagined the kitten on the sticker in front of her nose might stretch.

She looked out the window when she climbed out of the VR-medi pod. The sky was



bright and clear. She hurriedly scooted over to the window to look down, and saw that the snow had stayed, but it hadn't piled up much deeper and the pavement had already been cleared. After a minute she turned away and began her usual morning routine.

She was brushing her teeth when she realized that she had logged into the game but forgotten to send Aishin the familiar spell's ingredients list. She finished up hurriedly and logged in on her phone as she settled into her usual place in front of her screen. She was only part way through copying the list when she began to wish that she had screenshots unlocked and that she'd accepted Aishin's offer to exchange numbers or messenger contacts so that she didn't have to type them all.

After a minute she pulled up the game's forums on her main screen and did a search. She checked the list someone had posted of the ingredients a witch needed to collect and they were identical. She cancelled out of the message she'd been writing and messaged Aishin the forum link instead.

The forum had notifications waiting for her, and instead of closing it out, she tapped over to them curiously. Her "1000 Karma Character" posts had gathered even more replies. There was one from To-Be-A-Dragon that said: "I was so glad to find this post about your time in your egg! I thought the game had glitched, but found your post and have been spending this time raising my skill levels. My hatching timer as a Salamander feels really long, but this way I'm confident that it will be worth it. Thanks!"

### *63: Windbur*

Danika's day passed pretty normally, apart from one minor power outage that only lasted about five minutes. She didn't worry, since it was a pretty typical event during the first few days of harsher winter weather every year. She completed another small ordinary job, from one of her ordinary job sites.

The winter weather outside did make the midsummer scenery in the game feel a little disorienting when she logged back into "Living Jade Empire" that evening. But winter would come and go in the game while it remained winter in the region Danika lived in, since a year in the game passed every three months.

SaltySiamese had sent her a reply sometime during the afternoon since she'd checked for messages last. The message her cat delivered read: "Justin said Windbur is a fairy town between the village his tower is in and the human capital. He said if I want he'll portal us to his tower when he gets home tonight, and then take us there! Let's meet there! Send me a party invite and then you'll be able to track my location to it after we arrive!"

Danika frowned and sent a message to Aishin asking: "Is Windbur the fairy dell with the ducks?"

Then she sent the requested party invitation and wrote to SaltySiamese: "Are you already on your way there?"

SaltySiamese answered almost instantly: "Yup! We're all coming! Don't wait for Shrubbery, she said to tell you she can't play until late tonight if at all! I'll accept the invite as soon as we arrive in Windbur!"

Danika activated her wings and headed for the gate she'd first entered the human capital through with Aishin. She wasn't sure who "all" included, but she knew that SaltySiamese would complain if she had to wait around for too long after doing Danika the favor of finding the city.

A short reply from Aishin arrived in the familiar grasp of his little bat before she'd gone far, it read: "Maybe? I might be able to login in a few hours and check."

Danika sent back: "It's ok, by that time I'll have met up with SaltySiamese in Windbur."

Aishin's little bat hurried back a moment later: "Ok. Be careful."

Danika spotted the traveling merchant walking along the lane ahead of her after she'd traveled for a while, and zipped up to him.

"Good morning ZipZing!" he called out cheerily. "Where are you off to?"

"Hi," Danika replied happily. "I'm looking for a place called Windbur. It was recommended as a good starting town for me after the update, but I'm afraid that since one of my party members may have been attacked by ducks there, it might not be safe."

The traveling merchant said, "Hmm, let me think," and came to a halt.

Danika hovered beside him and waited. After a minute she realized that he was so still

because he didn't even appear to be breathing. She couldn't swear that he'd breathed before, but he'd always seemed very natural. She asked hesitantly, "Hello? It's ok if you don't know?"

He didn't move or respond and after a moment she filed a bug report. She hovered beside his frozen avatar worriedly, and then sent another message to SaltySiamese: "It might take me a bit longer than I expected."

A couple of minutes later SaltySiamese's cat arrived and dropped a reply: "Us too, we ran into an injured Centaur being attacked by a surprisingly high level band of goblins!"

It was only a bit later that a dark haired man in elaborate oriental robes similar to the Jade Emperor's appeared suddenly on the path beside the traveling merchant. A label appeared above his head even without bringing up her lens that read: "Celestial Servant Lin Hao".

Danika stared at him. After a minute she ventured, "Hi?"

"Let me just go over the logs first," Lin Hao said quickly, and made swiping motions at the faint shimmer of his screens.

Danika asked worriedly, "For you to show up so quickly, are all of his instances frozen?"

"Good question," Lin Hao replied, then tapped something and vanished.

He reappeared a moment later and announced cheerfully, "Fortunately it's just this one. It looks like he's just stuck in a loop determining the correct reply."

Lin Hao was still tapping at his menus with a puzzled frown when the traveling merchant looked up at Danika and replied at last, "You are correct on both counts, it is the recommended starting city for you, and you are likely to be attacked on arrival since you were in the party that provoked the wrath of the herders. Let me accompany you there and you can register yourself as a resident with the mayor, that should calm the herders."

Lin Hao looked up from his screens and stared at the traveling merchant. "He ended the loop and came up with an active solution!" he exclaimed.

Danika asked, "That's good right?" When he wasn't frozen, the merchant did appear to breathe and occasionally fiddled with the strings of his pack.

"It's excellent! I'm so proud," Lin Hao replied happily. But then he muttered, "But why did it take him so long." He continued to swipe at his screens under Danika's curious stare.

"Is it ok if I agree and continue then?" she questioned.

"Sure sure, I should go back to my space while I untangle this anyway," Lin Hao agreed with a nod and vanished again.

Danika told the merchant, "Thank you, I'll be glad to have your introduction to the mayor."

The merchant smiled and replied, "Let's try to arrive before the mayor sits down to

lunch then ZipZing," and set off down the path with long strides.

Danika zipped after him. After they'd passed through the second village, she asked curiously, "What happens if you meet yourself somewhere?"

The traveling merchant winked at her and replied, "That won't happen."

"How can you be sure?" she questioned.

"I always know where I am," he answered simply.

Nothing attacked them, as they traveled beyond the lanes and fields onto a narrow and unfamiliar path through the forest, the way things had when she'd traveled with Aishin. The path aligned itself along a stream and hills rose gently on either side as they progressed. Eventually they passed into a deep valley that the stream continued to tumble out of.

Fruit trees became more common along the path before the first buildings came into view. The buildings were almost entirely built into large trees. Spiraling staircases wound around trunks and suspended bridges crisscrossed the air. Pretty fairy children were herding ducks along the banks, and Danika zipped closer to the merchant as they all turned to watch her, even the ducks.

Other fairies flitted here and there among the tall buildings. Most of them were the standard small half human beings, but there were other fairy creatures here and there. Danika spotted a tiny flame winged person that blazed calmly like a small fire while sitting on a metal perch and talking with a small human sized person with the dark wings of a crow. Another tiny butterfly winged fairy seemed to be being followed by little rain clouds as it flitted from flower to flower.

The traveling merchant led her straight up to a broad knotty tree and ascended the spiral stairs up to an elaborately carved door. He tapped on the door, and it popped open to reveal a pretty fairy maid in a frilly apron.

## ***64: Never Never Never***

"The traveling merchant has brought us a novice!" the fairy maid exclaimed.

"Oh?" asked a jolly voice. "Bring them in then!"

The maid guided ZipZing and the merchant past stacked bolts of colorful fabrics, tall frames with vast quilts draped over them, and a variety of mysterious tools. A plump fairy was bent over a broad table, snipping a swath of fabric with tiny careful cuts that left the fabric on either side of the cut perfectly straight.

"Greetings Mayor Bell," the traveling merchant said cheerfully. "This is ZipZing, a fairy dragon and a novice. I hope you can welcome her to the dell."

The mayor finished her cut before replying warmly, "Of course, all of the fair folk are welcome to reside within Windbur. Quite a few novices begin their adventures here."

"What's involved in becoming a resident?" Danika asked warily. "I don't think that I could afford a house."

"Most novices can't," the maid spoke up laughingly.

The mayor nodded and said cheerfully, "I'm sure we can find you an unclaimed branch somewhere. No storms are ever allowed to bluster around in our dell. To become a resident you simply need to sign the registry and agree to abide by our three simple rules."

"What if I want to move later?" Danika questioned.

"When you register as a resident somewhere else within the empire, your name vanishes from this registry. It's no trouble at all," the mayor answered cheerfully. Danika glanced at the traveling merchant who nodded reassuringly. The mayor continued, "The three rules are: Never draw a weapon within the dell, arguments here are settled with words. Never cast a spell upon someone within the dell without their permission. Never refuse to share your food, we won't let anyone starve here."

Danika only hesitated for a moment before agreeing, "All right."

The mayor turned and flitted upward to pull an enormous book down from a shelf near the ceiling. Danika blinked, as the mayor used a featherweight spell to carry the book to the table. She flipped the book open scribbled something beside the next blank line on the page and held out the pen. "Here you are," she said cheerfully.

Danika hovered over the page for a moment before signing ZipZing on the blank line beside the date the mayor had written in. As soon as she'd signed she thought of another question. "Can non fairies become residents?"

"Only the spouses and children of our residents," the mayor replied cheerily.

"What about familiars?" Danika questioned with a pink sparkle.

The mayor blinked at her and then replied, "Of course familiars and pets are allowed, but they must be kept under control, if they attack anyone it will be regarded the same as if

you'd drawn a weapon." She waved to the maid and said, "Mirri will find you a branch to call your own. Don't be afraid to drop by anytime if you have any trouble in the dell."

The maid giggled and whispered as she led Danika back out of the maze of quilting and materials, "Welcome to the never never land of Windbur."

The traveling merchant asked kindly as they exited the mayor's abode, "Is there anything else I can do for you before I continue on ZipZing?"

Danika thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Do you have any healing and energy potions? My friend said that her party had run into a group of surprisingly high level goblins on their way."

"Of course I do," he replied cheerfully. "And there are also a couple of healers who reside in Windbur."

The maid waited patiently while Danika traded the rest of her frogs teeth for three potions that looked identical to the ones Aishin had fed her while they trained, and three red potions that were supposed to have the same effect for health as those had for energy.

Her inventory was stuffed full again when she finished, although the embroidered pouch held only three items, since that was the most she had of identical things.

The merchant waved farewell and Danika followed the butterfly winged maid through the treetop city, to an oak near the edge of the village. Mirri turned to her and asked, "Would this tree suit you? Or would you prefer an evergreen?"

Danika watched the upper branches swaying in the breeze that had been blowing gently since she'd followed the merchant into the valley. She thought of the snow outside her apartment in the real world and asked, "Will it ever snow here?"

"Oh yes," the maid assured her, "but only gently during midwinter week for the health of the trees. The heavy storms are held beyond the boundary even during the worst winters. This tree turns lovely colors in the fall and has only three other occupants."

Danika looked at the tree and asked questioningly, "How can you tell which branches are occupied?"

The fairy maid flew closer and pointed to a leaf. "See how all the leaves on this branch have a thread of blue in the vein? That's the color the tree assigned to Torrent, and this is her branch."

Danika squinted at the leaves, and then nodded. She flew around the tree. It looked like none of the lower branches were marked. After a moment she pointed to a broad sturdy branch that she thought was low enough that Aishin could simply jump up to sit on it, and that Shrubby or an elf could probably climb up to easily.

Mirri gazed at her with surprise and asked, "Are you afraid of heights ZipZing? If you're worried about falling out of the tree when you're asleep, there are several crafters who would trade services for nest building."

"I have wingless friends," Danika explained, just as SaltySiamese finally joined the party.

"Oh, I see," Mirri said cheerfully. "Well, if that's the spot that pleases you, simply place your hand upon the branch and say 'I'm home'. And if you want to move later just tell the tree, 'Thank you for sheltering me, but I'm ready for new sights'."

Danika had barely completed the small ritual and was watching a thread of brighter green spill through the leaves of her branch, when an elf with cream colored hair tipped in chocolate brown dashed up and shouted, "I found her! Come this way!"

Danika smiled and told SaltySiamese, "I'm surprised that you chose to play an elf instead of a cat half."

SaltySiamese grinned back at her and replied, "I almost chose to play as a tiger, but I decided that not having hands would be too frustrating. Besides, elves are pretty cat-like, we have pointed ears and can see invisible things! And did you look at the cat human cross?!"

"No," Danika admitted as the familiar figures of Justin, Quin, and Terri followed a short rotund creature with large round ears that was dressed in a bright yellow cloak over to where SaltySiamese stood.

"It was a sphinx!" SaltySiamese complained. "So creepy!"

## *65: So Fluffy*

Danika gazed at the plushy rodent face of the rotund creature and zipped forward to squeeze its cheeks and exclaim questioningly, "What are you?" Her arms sank into the plush fur as though it was a soft cloud and she added, "You are so soft!"

"Isn't he just the cutest!?" Terri agreed and rubbed his fuzzy head between his ears which turned pink inside.

"S'top that," the victim complained gruffly, and Danika released him quickly.

"Sorry," Danika apologized and brought up her lens. The lens revealed that MatchlessMinion was a Chinchillamin and a Proficient Thief. His accumulated level was more than 10 points higher than his sister's, at 76. "A chinchillamin?" she questioned doubtfully. "Is that really a creature?"

MatchlessMinion escaped from Terri's petting and then turned and told Danika, "Chinchillas are real creatures, the min means man. I had to make it a half human because my sister looted my accounts of resources before she submitted hers and I had to start with under 300 Karma."

"Hey," protested SaltySiamese, "I helped you earn most of it!"

MatchlessMinion waved a small hand dismissively and explained, "And I chose a mousy type of animal because she said she was going to play a cat person, but she wimped out and made an elf instead," he added scornfully, "just because it's prettier."

Danika giggled and SaltySiamese tossed her head and protested, "Cats spend a lot of time on their appearances, it's a perfectly cat-like choice."

Danika asked curiously as she accepted the friend invite from MatchlessMinion and the new invitation from Quin, "Aren't there werocats?"

"Ugh, don't even go there," MatchlessMinion grumbled.

"There are!" SaltySiamese exclaimed. "They do exist somewhere in the game! I've been searching for them because it's a curse and not a species, so you can't choose it when you create your incarnation!"

MatchlessMinion rolled his eyes.

Justin said, "If you ever get a chance to collect some werecat blood, sell it to me first ZipZing."

Quin winked at Danika and added, "Because if he can turn his girlfriend into a cat, she'll be purrfect for him."

Terri whacked Quin on the shoulder so hard that he stumbled and said, "You keep teasing Justin about getting a girlfriend because you've never dated anyone."

"We're not dating!" SaltySiamese protested. But then she whispered to Danika, "Not that I wouldn't."



Danika glanced at Justin who maintained an indifferent expression.

Terri laughed and stuck her tongue out at SaltySiamese, who blushed.

MatchlessMinion sighed and asked, "Anyway, what's so interesting about this fairy town that you were searching for it ZipZing? And you got here before us anyway?"

"Oh, right, are you all ok? SaltySiamese said you ran into a centaur attacked by goblins?" Danika questioned.

"You can shorten it to Salty like everyone else does if you want ZipZing, I don't care anymore," SaltySiamese said.

Quin said, "We're all ok, but they were pretty tough, something is seriously up with the goblins lately. Centaurs and goblins are usually found on the plains in the southwest, but since the game went public goblin tribes are popping up everywhere."

"We left the centaur with the healer at the edge of town," MatchlessMinion explained.

"I'm all out of healing potions," SaltySiamese complained.

"Here," Danika said and offered SaltySiamese two of the healing potions she'd traded for.

SaltySiamese took the potions with a surprised expression, and asked, "Are you sure it's ok for me to take these?"

"It's ok," Danika agreed, but added with embarrassment, "but I hope I find some profitable quests soon, I have a contract for an enchanted item coming due in a few days."

"Enchanted equipment is ridiculously expensive," Quin agreed.

"Want me to steal it for you Captain?" MatchlessMinion offered with a sly rodent expression on his plushy face.

Danika's wings sparkled pinkly as she waved her little clawed hands in protest. "Don't! I'm not your captain here, and Logical Heart really deserves ten times what he asked for to create it."

"Logical Heart? The top enchanter in the game is making you something?" Justin asked curiously.

"Um, I guess so?" Danika agreed questioningly. "He's a gnome?"

"Yeah," Justin agreed.

"Standing around chattering is boring," Terri complained.

"So go ask around for quests," Justin replied dismissively.

"I should be going around and doing that," Danika admitted.

"Let's split up in pairs and meet back here in half an hour!" SaltySiamese proposed.

"I get to go with ZipZing then," MatchlessMinion announced.

"I'll go with Justin, and Terri and Quin can go together," SaltySiamese declared.

"What if I want to go with ZipZing?" Quin complained.

"Hey!" Terri scolded, "If you act like you don't want to go with me, you'd better not count on me to block for you next time."

"Ehhh, don't take it so seriously," Quin replied quickly. "I was just asking."

MatchlessMinion beckoned quietly and skipped off. After a moment Danika shrugged and followed him.

--

They had spoken to half a dozen of the residents of Windbur before Danika spotted the fairy dragon.

Danika pointed excitedly and squeaked, "Look look!"

MatchlessMinion oriented himself in the direction she was pointing and said with surprise, "Another fairy dragon?"

Danika pulled up her menu lens and saw that the fairy dragon's blue label read "Hearthdragon". It was another player.

Danika zipped right up to the other fairy dragon and practically shouted, "Hi!"

The fairy dragon gasped and dropped the item it was examining. "Wow!" it exclaimed.

"I thought maybe I was the only one in the game! I'm ZipZing!" Danika exclaimed.

The fairy dragon blushed and its wings sparkled pinkly as it admitted, "I know who you are. I decided to reincarnate as a fairy dragon instead of reviving this time after I read what you posted about your adventures."

"Oh, so you have fans too?" Aishin commented with amusement.

Danika spun and gasped. "Aishin! Look, look!" She pointed at Hearthdragon.

"Who are you, and how did you sneak up on us?" MatchlessMinion asked suspiciously.

Aishin narrowed his eyes at the small mousy person and asked, "Shouldn't I be the one asking that?"

Danika pointed at MatchlessMinion and explained, "It's MatchlessMinion, SaltySiamese's little brother, we know each other from playing some older games together." She waved at Aishin and told MatchlessMinion, "This is Aishin, he's..." she hesitated and Aishin, MatchlessMinion and Hearthdragon all watched with interest as her

wings sparkled pinkly.

"Your boyfriend?" MatchlessMinion suggested gruffly.

Danika met Aishin's gaze and her blush deepened as she shook her head quickly. She waved her arms and tried to explain, "He um, he agreed to be my familiar later..." she hesitated again.

Aishin flashed a grin at her and winked. "I did," he agreed.

"Ehh!?" Hearthdragon asked, "Can you make a human into a familiar? Does that mean a human can make another human their familiar?"

"I don't know," Danika admitted.

MatchlessMinion stepped forward and offered Aishin his small hand in greeting. "Welcome to the minion life, friend," he said quietly.

## 66: Spider Trap

Aishin glanced at ZipZing and then flashed another grin and reached down to give MatchlessMinion's little hand a quick shake.

Danika objected, "I haven't treated you like a minion," MatchlessMinion looked at her so doubtfully that she added, "compared to your sister?"

The little chinchillamin rolled his eyes expressively.

Aishin laughed and rescued her by asking, "What are you up to? It took me half an hour to follow you here because I was slowed down by a band of goblins, but I can still play for another half an hour."

"You ran into goblins too? SaltySiamese was going to guide me here, but I met the traveling merchant on the way and after he crashed, he recovered and guided me to the mayor, who let me register as a resident," Danika explained quickly. "And I need more quests that pay coin so I can pay Logical Heart next week."

"I guess that explains how you got here first," MatchlessMinion commented.

"The traveling merchant crashed on your way here? They've really changed this place since I passed through it before the update, but why would that affect the traveling merchant?" Aishin asked.

Danika shrugged and replied, "Well he completely froze for a bit."

"I know of a quest that pays a lot of coin, if it's still available," Hearthdragon offered. Everyone turned to look at the other fairy dragon and it blushed.

"I don't want to poach your quest," Danika protested.

"Oh no, I refused it," Hearthdragon explained quickly. "The weaver wants someone to catch thousands of golden orb spiders! Spiders eat flying bugs though, so it sounded way too dangerous to me." The little dragon gave a dramatic shudder before adding, "But if you don't mind such a creepy quest, it did pay several coin per spider."

"I don't mind bugs," MatchlessMinion offered, "but Salty will freak out. Let's take it!"

Aishin laughed and Danika eyed MatchlessMinion doubtfully. Aishin asked Hearthdragon politely, "Then can you show us to this weaver so that we can ask if the offer is still available?"

"Sure," Hearthdragon agreed cheerfully.

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The weaver's tree was broad and bushy and grew at the edge of Windbur near the sloping valley wall. The east facing slope was crowded with mulberry trees. Two familiar figures blocked the doorway.

"ZipZing!" Quin called out. "We found a great quest. Any number of parties can

participate."

"Did you already tell Salty?" MatchlessMinion asked with disappointment. "I wanted to see her face when we told her it was spider hunting."

"I just messaged Justin," Terri announced. She grinned at MatchlessMinion and added, "I didn't mention the spiders, we can tell them when they get here."

"Aw," Quin complained, "you already found out about it first?"

"We were told about it being offered to someone else," Danika told Quin reassuringly and gestured toward Hearthdragon. "We haven't been here to speak to the weaver yet."

Hearthdragon bobbed nervously, and jumped when Terri shrieked, "There are two of them!" She jumped off of the edge of the staircase she and Quin stood on and landed in front of Danika with a thump.

Aishin moved his hand to his sword hilt and Danika zipped over and placed her little clawed hands on top of his. "You can't draw a weapon, or cast a spell on anyone without their permission, or refuse to share food while in the dell," Danika explained quickly.

"Oh?" Aishin asked. "Is that what sets off the ducks?"

"Ducks?" MatchlessMinion asked curiously.

"So what is this fantastic quest?" Justin asked dryly as he and SaltySiamese walked up behind MatchlessMinion.

Terri told Aishin, "Move your fairy dragon over here too so I can get a cute screenshot for my wallpaper!" She was forcing Hearthdragon into a position above MatchlessMinion's shoulder with her hands.

"She's not a toy," Aishin said softly.

MatchlessMinion shot him a look and said quickly, "Captain Dawnstar, I mean ZipZing, please just let her get her pictures. It's really not worth making a fuss over, she'll just keep whining until we do it." He looked up at Hearthdragon and whispered, "Sorry about this."

Danika patted Aishin's hand and then flew over to hover above the little chinchillamin, beside the other fairy dragon player.

Terri made a picture frame with her hands three times and then announced, "Got it! Thanks!" She glared at MatchlessMinion and added, "That wasn't so bad was it? And I don't whine, I'm just persistent."

Justin cleared his throat and asked, "The quest?"

MatchlessMinion turned to his sister and announced, "It's just a material acquisition quest. You'll love it."

SaltySiamese eyed her brother and asked doubtfully, "What's the stuff guarded by?"

Quin chuckled and winked at MatchlessMinion before saying, "Don't worry, they're

practically falling out of trees, all we have to do is gather them."

Hearthdragon said nervously, "I'm going to leave you to it then." The little dragon looked at ZipZing and added with more enthusiasm, "It was really cool to meet you, I hope I'll see you around other times."

"Me too!" Danika agreed quickly and Hearthdragon smiled and fled, zipping away through the house laden trees with a swiftness more suited to a hummingbird than a butterfly.

Aishin frowned and said, "I wish I had time to play long enough to help you gather them, can you wait until tomorrow night ZipZing?"

"If it's thousands of them," Danika pointed out, "it'll probably take several days even with more than one party?"

"I suppose so," Aishin agreed.

"Don't worry, I'll guard her with my life," MatchlessMinion declared stoutly, making Danika blink at him with a surprised expression. She'd always felt like SaltySiamese's little brother tolerated her, rather than holding her in any particular regard.

Aishin didn't respond, but SaltySiamese questioned suspiciously, "Guard her from what?"

MatchlessMinion smiled sweetly, making his eyes almost vanish behind his furry cheeks and replied, "Anything that tries to attack her while we're questing together of course."

"I'm the one that's in her party right now," SaltySiamese pointed out smugly.

"You should trade me," MatchlessMinion replied quickly, "then there will be two guys and two girls in each party, right?"

Justin asked sourly, "Shouldn't we split up according to our ability to gather whatever it is instead of by gender?"

Aishin turned and looked at Justin for a long moment, and he flicked a narrow eyed glance at Danika. Danika raised her eyebrows inquiringly. Aishin shook his head and then told Justin, "Thanks for giving ZipZing that apple."

"Oh, yeah!" Danika exclaimed. "Sorry, I forgot, but I did want to thank you."

Justin blinked at Aishin, and then glanced at ZipZing and said lightly, "It was nothing." His menus shimmered faintly as he turned them in Aishin's direction, but he made no other move.

Aishin walked calmly up the stairs past Quin and entered the weavery.

The two siblings continued to argue about who should be in Danika's party until Terri exclaimed, "Let's just all accept the quest and travel together to start with! It's not like we know how difficult they're going to be to catch?"

"How difficult what are to catch? You said we were gathering something," SaltySiamese said while poking MatchlessMinion's fluffy tail.

"Check your quests," Aishin instructed from the doorway. He flashed a grin at ZipZing and said, "I've accepted it for our party. Message if you get into too much trouble, we're pretty busy, but I can have them cover for me for a few minutes if I need to."

"Ok," Danika replied, and Aishin logged out. She pulled up her menus and asked with surprise, "It really is a party quest and shows for us all?"

SaltySiamese asked, "Is this your first party quest? The only real difference is that the rewards are split automatically." A moment later she looked up from her menu screen and squeaked, "Spiders!?" She pointed at MatchlessMinion accusingly and sputtered, "You you you rat!"

## 67: Web Spinner

To Danika's surprise they weren't setting off to some secret spider cave or combing the mulberry covered slopes in their spider hunt. Their party distribution also turned out to be pretty much irrelevant, because the large golden orb spiders were town dwellers.

Whether it was because the lights in the fairy trees attracted more bugs, or because the weather in the fairy dell was artificially milder, the weaver's spiders were like unofficial residents of Windbur. Once she got over her fear of the plump spiders who were each big enough to be a full armful for her, Danika had the advantage over the others. She could fly to catch the ones in the treetops, and follow the spiders into more of the narrow places that they fled to.

She would use her stealth with her invisibility to approach silently, and pounce on a spider's back, wrapping her arms around it so that it couldn't turn and bite her, and then carry the spider back to the weaver. There the spiders were loaded into a strange and complicated device that held them caged as they were spun while the device wove six strands of spider silk into a thread and onto a spindle as it turned.

Quin and SaltySiamese were the best at spotting the spiders with their keen elven vision. MatchlessMinion was their second best spider catcher, mostly because he wasn't afraid of them, but also because his thick fur was so dense that the spiders had trouble biting him if they did evade his first grab.

Terri was the first person to log off for the night. Her paladin wasn't suited to catching spiders, although she and Justin might have been the top performers if they'd been trying to kill instead of catch them. Justin used his Subdue spell and a Slow spell that seemed to have similar effects to ZipZing's breath attacks to aid MatchlessMinion, but like Danika, he had to stop and eat often to replenish his energy from the constant casting.

Danika asked Justin, "Shouldn't you have a much larger energy capacity than I do?"

Justin nodded, but replied calmly, "The recharge rate doesn't increase though, so when I'm out of energy we're on equal footing."

Quin was the next to log off for the night, saying, "I've got a busy day tomorrow. There's no time limit, so don't stay up too late!"

Danika asked SaltySiamese when she had deposited her latest capture, "Don't you and MatchlessMinion need to go soon as well?"

MatchlessMinion carried another spider into the weavery in time to hear the question and told her, "I've got all my homework done. We can stay up and work on this as long as you need us to."

His spider filled the machine up to another half dozen and the little fairy weaver started the contraption spinning.

Danika checked her bio screen and looked at the time before replying, "Actually, I'm trying to keep a better sleep schedule, so I should probably quit in about another quarter of an hour."



SaltySiamese laughed and said, "Then stop talking and catch faster! You two can fill this thing once more within 15 minutes! Go my minions!"

MatchlessMinion rolled his eyes at his sister and said, "Then you'd better get out there and spot six more spiders for us!"

SaltySiamese didn't fuss or try to shirk the duty. She led them all back out into the fairy town and soon located another few targets. They caught all six spiders needed to refill the web spinning thread machine before Danika's alarm popped up its notice. They'd caught a total of 140 spiders, which meant that each team collected 360 coin for the day's labor.

Justin commented, "This isn't a bad quest, but it's not really paying much compared to the time it takes."

MatchlessMinion shrugged and replied, "Most of us aren't very suited to spider catching. You don't have to do it again tomorrow if you don't feel like it."

"Hey," SaltySiamese protested, "Justin helped you catch more than I did."

Justin shrugged and replied, "I think we both played about equal support roles. Don't worry about it. I won't have much time to help tomorrow though."

"Isn't this fabric incredibly expensive if each of the threads used costs 30 coin just for the spiders?" Danika questioned.

MatchlessMinion fluffed out his bright yellow cloak and said, "Yeah, but it's awesome! It's stronger than kevlar! It's what my cloak is made from."

SaltySiamese snickered and corrected, "You mean that's what your loin cloth is made from!" Danika looked at her questioningly, and SaltySiamese added, "Don't let him tell you that's a cloak ZipZing! We got it as part of the reward from a Minotaur's quest, and it says it's a loin cloth!" She laughed uproariously.

Justin grinned and MatchlessMinion protested, "It doesn't matter what its label says, it lets me wear it as a cloak, and it's still awesome!"

Danika winked at MatchlessMinion and agreed, "Practical use is definitely more important than labels, don't worry." She held out her arm with her storage ring around her wrist and said, "This says it's a ring, even though it lets me wear it as a bracelet or an arm band."

MatchlessMinion held up his little hand in an oddly dramatic pose. After a moment he complained, "Don't just leave me standing, give me five ZipZing!"

Danika laughed and zipped forward to tap her little clawed hand against his.

"I'm going to log off," Justin announced.

"Wait," protested SaltySiamese, "re-add me to your party first?" Justin raised an eyebrow at her but a moment later SaltySiamese left the party that Aishin had started. She turned to ZipZing and said quickly, "I'll still help more tomorrow though!"

"It's ok," Danika replied with a smile.

"Hey, if Salty is coming back to this one, add me to yours ZipZing!" MatchlessMinion insisted suddenly. He looked at his sister and added defensively, "Then Ranma can join you guys when he finishes his Noble Steed quest."

"Hmph," SaltySiamese huffed derisively, "like you care about him. You'd just rather play with ZipZing and Shrubbery than your own sister." She stuck her tongue out at her little brother.

MatchlessMinion replied smugly, "Duh?"

Justin said quickly, "I'm out. G'night," and logged off.

Danika looked at SaltySiamese uncertainly and the elf tossed her chocolate tipped cream hair, flapped her hand at ZipZing, and declared, "Add him!" She winked and added, "And then work him to death! He asked for it!"

MatchlessMinion made a rude gesture toward his sister but agreed, "Add me! I'll work hard!"

Danika laughed and sent MatchlessMinion an invite which he accepted instantly. "I should really go sleep now though," she said wryly.

"Ok, see you tomorrow!" MatchlessMinion replied cheerfully.

"Goodnight!" SaltySiamese shouted and logged out first. MatchlessMinion winked at Danika and logged out a moment later.

Danika smiled. She glanced at the golden spiders spinning in the weaver's device and told the NPC weaver politely, "We'll return to seek more spiders in about three days."

The fairy smiled at her and replied, "I'll release all the spiders who've been emptied of their silk tonight, and they will create more. There's no end to the amount of spider silk that I can use, and no hurry. Rest well."

Danika smiled and followed the sibling's example. She logged off and checked that her alarm was set for the morning. When she was on the edge of sleep she thought of Aishin and the way he could grab her out of the air, and smiled again. He'd probably be very good at catching golden orb spiders too.

## ***68: Poisonous Mistake***

When she woke up, Danika's first thought wasn't of Aishin or the siblings, it was that she hadn't seen Shrubbery online at all the day before. She wondered if it meant that things were worse.

After she got up, she loaded the mobile version of the game on her phone and wrote a message. She erased it and wrote again. She erased that and stared at her screen for awhile. It was just like when Shrubbery had said that her mother was dying: everything she could think of to say sounded horrible, but saying nothing felt even worse.

Finally she sent: "I don't know what to say or ask, but I am here (figuratively)."

Shrubbery sent a reply a minute later: "LOL I know that you're not logged in, because I am. Thanks. Everything's the same for now. Just long days."

Danika huffed a sigh, and moved on to her email notifications. There was a job offer waiting from the company that she'd worked with on the leveling of the 20 old accounts. They wanted a three month contract leveling old accounts for resale.

She hesitated for several minutes before writing her reply, and scolded herself for wishful thinking the whole time, but she still wrote: "I'd like to accept, but I'd want you to waive the penalty for quitting before it's finished if I happen to get a support position I applied for with "Living Jade Empire".

She had completed her exercises, breakfasted, and cleaned up before they replied. The owner implied in his reply that he thought it very unlikely, but agreed to her condition as long as she agreed to give three days notice. Danika grinned and accepted the rewritten contract, and then logged in for her first shift.

The first account she received was a mess. It was locked into one of the worst quests in its game, and wouldn't be able to progress until it was completed. People had been known to quit the game and delete their accounts in frustration after they discovered how difficult it was to complete.

Danika actually sent a message asking if they were sure they wanted her to invest the time into it instead of starting a new account before she started in on it. The reply came back: "Yes, complete it. They're closing this game in 48 days, new accounts can no longer be created and the save games will only remain submittable with Living Jade Empire until it closes because everything is kept server side. We bought 63 accounts stuck in this quest for practically nothing, and when these are finished we have a batch of old Blockcraft accounts."

Danika gazed at her screen for a long minute before switching back to the account and starting in on it. She was getting paid a low base rate for her time, and her results would only boost that, but she was pretty sure that her efficiency rating was about to take a nosedive. She searched for the latest guides and puzzle solutions on the side while she carefully completed the hopping puzzle the account was currently in. A single misstep would force the character to start over at the bottom.

When Danika dragged herself over the edge of the VR-medi pod after her shift that night, she was tired. She'd maintained a better efficiency than she'd feared, but she kind of wondered if she'd made a mistake in accepting the three month contract if every day was going to be like this one.

She had barely oriented herself in front of the weavery when Aishin snatched ZipZing out of the air and held her on his palms in front of his face, the way he did sometimes, and told her flatly, "I'll catch as many spiders as you want, just don't ask me to talk tonight."

Danika gulped, and replied uncertainly, "Ok?"

Shrubbery said from behind her, "MatchlessMinion will be on soon, but Salty has to finish a report first."

Danika craned her head around to look at the dryad. "Ok," she replied. "Did you run into any trouble on your way here? Everyone but me ran into goblins yesterday."

Shrubbery shook her head and replied tiredly, "I didn't even try to come overland, I asked my tree to bring me, so it'll be out of energy for a few game days."

"Your tree carried you?!" Danika exclaimed questioningly.

Shrubbery gave a small laugh and replied, "No, it sent me to a local tree. It's a dryad thing that I'm too tired to try to explain."

"Ok," Danika replied.

Aishin's hands were warm and Danika leaned against his fingers with her eyes closed for a long moment before she realized what she was doing. She quickly activated her wings and rose into the air. Her wings sparkled pinkly, a color that deepened with her increasing embarrassment at their exposure of her embarrassment.

Aishin flashed a grin at her, but didn't comment, and they quietly began gathering spiders. Shrubbery and Aishin were even better at it than ZipZing.

Shrubbery had some ability that let her make ordinary trees act like the grasping aspens, or the trap that Callie Kyo's guild had used on ZipZing. A leaf would suddenly wrap around an unsuspecting spider, cocooning it, and then fall from the branch. Shrubbery would either catch it, or scoop it up from the ground, and was able to deliver her spiders without ever having to touch them.

Aishin had some sort of life detect skill, and could spot spiders that were completely hidden within a certain radius. He was only hampered by the restriction against drawing weapons within Windbur, as he had to climb into the trees without using his throwing stars as steps. His figure was a lithe distraction as he performed the acrobatics necessary to move in and out of the trees.

Danika simply continued her aerial sneak and grab tactics.

When MatchlessMinion logged in, he greeted ZipZing cheerfully, "Hi! How goes the quest?" He apparently brought up his menus to check, because before Danika had made it to the quest screen he added, "Woah! Are we going to have to start looking for spiders in other towns?"

Danika blinked and looked at her own screen, in the last hour they'd already gathered almost 70 spiders. She shrugged and asked, "Wouldn't it be too difficult to transport them? If we run out of spiders to catch, shouldn't we just move on to other things for the night?"

MatchlessMinion frowned and then nodded. "I suppose so," he agreed.

The two of them rejoined the spider hunt with Aishin and Shrubbery. MatchlessMinion switched tactics, and used his thieving skills to sneak quietly into fairy houses to bring out spiders from their cozy corner webs. No one talked, and Danika felt like the silence was tainting the air and making it feel heavy.

Even MatchlessMinion quietly gathered spiders without comment, but after awhile Danika realized that he didn't seem as tired and subdued as she felt. She glanced at Aishin the next time she passed him and he winked at her. Her mood lightened a little.

Danika made the mistake of becoming too focused while sneaking up on her next target, and another spider got the drop on her and bit her. Her health started dropping, and she broke the silence worriedly, "I need to stop and find one of the healers, I seem to be poisoned."

MatchlessMinion was the only one near enough to hear her, and he clutched his latest spider and advised calmly, "Just tell Shrubbery, she can cure most poisons." He scampered in the direction of the weaver.

Danika turned and followed her party compass to Shrubbery who looked up at her and gasped. "You're poisoned? You got bitten?" Shrubbery asked worriedly.

"You can tell just by looking?" Danika questioned. "MatchlessMinion said you can cure poisons?"

Shrubbery nodded and placed her latest leaf wrapped victim on the ground and held out her hands. "I have to touch you," she said softly.

Danika zipped over and landed on Shrubbery's hands. They were cool and felt more like plant than flesh. Tiny vines twined around Shrubbery's wrists and over Danika's feet and then crawled across her body. The vines seemed to glow and pulse a little before they withdrew in the same fashion. Traces of purple threaded beneath Shrubbery's skin and Danika asked worriedly, "Did you just take the poison into yourself?"

Shrubbery nodded, but said reassuringly, "Yes, but it will dissipate within a few minutes. Are you regaining health now?"

Danika checked her menus and nodded. Shrubbery smiled and Danika flicked over to the party screen and saw that Shrubbery's health was reassuringly stable. The threads of color beneath her skin were beginning to fade as well.

MatchlessMinion said from the path behind Danika, "See, aren't dryads freaking cool?"

"Yeah," Danika agreed.

Shrubbery blushed and shrugged. "I level more slowly though."

MatchlessMinion said stoutly, "It's just a number, don't worry about it. Do you want me to carry that spider back for you so you can rest for a minute?" He pointed at the leaf wrapped spider at Shrubbery's feet.

"Only if you don't mind," Shrubbery replied a bit shyly.

MatchlessMinion bounced forward and scooped up the spider and scurried off with it. A few minutes later the girls resumed their spider hunting, but the next time Danika passed MatchlessMinion she whispered, "You seem so much more grown-up than I remember..."

MatchlessMinion's round ears went pink inside. "I'm not a little kid anymore you know."

"Yeah," Danika agreed admiringly.

## *69: Hidden Treasure*

When SaltySiamese finally logged on, spiders were already really scarce. Everyone was scattered across the fairy town looking for stragglers when Aishin caught up with Danika using the party compass. Danika dropped out of the treetop and down to his level when he silently held something out to her.

"What is it?" Danika asked, and then remembered that he didn't want to talk. "Uh, you don't have to answer if you don't want to," she added quickly.

Aishin grinned and said, "Thanks."

"I don't need any thank you," Danika protested.

He laughed the quick laugh of an emote, and reached out and caught her in his other hand. "Silly," he said without inflection. "This," he held the bag in his other hand up to her clawed hands, "is insurance in case I can't connect for a few days. You can give it back if you don't use it." The bag was as big as she was.

After a moment Danika accepted the bag and placed it into one of the spots she'd emptied of candy without looking inside of it, which meant that it wasn't a bag of holding. "Ok?" she agreed doubtfully.

"Wish me luck?" Aishin asked.

Danika wished he were using his home system so that she could see his expression, or at least his headset so that she could hear his voice, but after a moment she declared, "I wish you the best of luck!"

He flicked one last grin at her as he logged out.

--

By the time Quin and Terri logged on, they were all ready to give up on spider hunting for the night. Danika's party had gathered over 200 spiders by then, and Danika's share of the coin was over 250, more than double the previous night's profit. SaltySiamese had only found five more spiders, and MatchlessMinion caught them for her and even made sure that the fairy attributed those to her party.

Terri pouted at them, but didn't really seem to be disappointed to have missed out on more spiders. Quin was the one who asked, "Should we scout around the town and see if we run into more goblins?"

Shrubbery said, "I'm sorry, I'm going to log off if we're done with spiders. I should check on things and there's a concert streaming tonight that I'd like to watch."

"Oh, what band?" Terri asked with interest. "What kind of music do you like? I prefer stuff you can dance to!"

"Haha, that's very like you," Shrubbery replied. "It's the annual free concert that Mirage does every year."

"Mirage?" Terri asked doubtfully. "I don't think I've heard of them."

"I'm sure you'd recognize the songs," Danika spoke up. "That's a really old group. My mom used to listen to their stuff whenever she cleaned, she said it made the chores go faster."

"Old people music?" Terri asked in a scandalized tone.

"Eh, classic pop, I guess?" Shrubbery replied uncertainly. "But there's a current boy band that most people would recognize," her gaze shifted from Terri to ZipZing, "that will play with them tonight as the first stop on their next tour, called Underneath."

"What's so great about boy bands?" MatchlessMinion asked with disgust.

Terri exclaimed, "Oh, Underneath have done some good songs! If these old Mirage people can play with them, maybe I'll look them up later."

SaltySiamese poked her brother and asked, "What's so great about idol girls?"

Quin suggested, "They're cute and funny?"

Justin, who had logged on when no one was looking, commented dryly, "I had no idea you were into boy bands Quin."

"Idol girls!" Quin protested.

SaltySiamese snickered and Justin grinned as Terri agreed, "Yeah, boy bands are usually cute and have at least one funny member," she glanced at MatchlessMinion and added, "idol girls are usually both too. I always wished I could grow up to be one, until I found out what kind of diets most of them have to maintain."

"What are you planning to do now?" Danika asked curiously.

"Design things that add cuteness to the world without starving anyone!" Terri exclaimed.

"Goblins?" Quin asked again in a desperate bid to change the subject.

"Sure," Justin agreed.

--

The six of them followed the stream upward out of the fairy dell toward Oliva. They reached an area that showed evidence of recent logging before they reached the point that Justin's party had fought the goblins that had been attacking the centaur. Quin had a tracking skill, but lost the trail a short distance away.

"Maybe they used a teleport scroll?" SaltySiamese suggested.

"They could have used any number of transportation methods," Justin replied.

They circled Windbur, following the ridges that cradled the dell west, and then crossing the lower valley and heading east again. They found some evidence of recent



logging in two more spots, but no goblins were caught in the act. Even though Justin had been the last to arrive, he was the first to log off.

SaltySiamese was the one who spotted the tree that was hiding the gold at the last logging site when they passed through it a second time on their way back to Windbur. There were discarded branches with wilting foliage laying around each of the logged areas, but she pointed at a pile at the last site and asked, "Don't those leaves seem a bit sparkly? But they don't glow with magic?"

Quin walked over and examined them with her. "I don't know? They aren't much different?"

Danika couldn't detect any difference at all, but MatchlessMinion brought up his menus and examined their invisible contents intently before announcing, "There is a large amount of gold nearby." He moved around like someone holding a metal detector for awhile, until he finally halted between three good sized stumps and announced, "Somewhere within three meters of here? I think?"

SaltySiamese walked over to stand next to her brother's short chinchillamin figure and looked around. She pointed to one of the three stumps and exclaimed, "That stump looks like it has flecks of golden glitter in it!"

This time Quin agreed, "It does!"

They discussed it a bit and then used a combination of their skills, including Danika's featherweight spell to pull the trunk out of the ground and revealed the decayed chest buried beneath it. Danika's currency appraisal valued the small collection of corroded coins at a bit over 5,000 coin worth.

They carried it back to the fairy dell where the traveling merchant waited conveniently. Terri said, "Lucky!" She dashed forward to the merchant and demanded that he exchange the corroded coins for the standard coin hearts of the empire.

She also insisted that they split the coins among each of the group who'd found them instead of evenly between the two parties. Only Danika was hesitant, but both SaltySiamese who'd initiated the find and MatchlessMinion persuaded her that it was a perfectly reasonable division.

Quin asked, "Are you unhappy because our party is receiving a larger share ZipZing?"

Danika shook her head quickly and MatchlessMinion laughed and told Quin, "No, she thinks we should share with Justin, Shrubbery and that Aishin guy."

Danika nodded, and SaltySiamese shouted, "Just keep the money idiot! If you resist Match and I will give you our shares too!"

Quin laughed when Danika hastily tapped her inventory ring and stored her share. "You guys are weird, fun, but weird," he said laughingly.

"Don't forget cute!" Terri insisted as she grabbed MatchlessMinion and rubbed his fluffy head.

## *70: Christmas Goblins*

Even though Danika was tired when she logged out, she couldn't resist looking up the band Underneath before she went to sleep. She was already expecting it, so she wasn't shocked to see Aishin's familiar figure in the group. She did feel a little surprised somehow that he wasn't the group's leader when she tapped over to their information summary.

The leader, Tanaka Naoki, was a little older than Aichi Shinichi and had a smaller and more delicate build. Aishin's pretty face didn't stand out as much in the group of five attractive young men, but Danika would still have voted for his familiar face in a heartbeat if there'd been a competition.

It took her awhile to find a song with Aichi Shinichi singing a few lines solo, because the group used a lot of harmony in their songs. Danika frowned and replayed it several times before deciding that the silvery ring that Shrubbery spoke of was probably the resonance, as though the voice was producing more than one sound at the same time, that some singers had and others didn't.

She wrestled with her conscience a bit before searching for interview footage. It felt kind of like she was spying on Aishin by researching Aichi Shinichi. She remembered Shrubbery's comment about millions of girls and decided to compromise and watch one at random without trying to seek out everything.

She felt embarrassed for him as she watched the interview from a couple of years before. Aishin, or at least Aichi Shinichi, was too awkward and stiff compared to his bandmates. Although he did at least speak more than the group's baritone, who appeared relaxed, but rarely spoke. The other three members joked around a little and acted fairly comfortable.

It was actually the baritone's voice that made her think of Aishin's friends talking in the background the first time he'd used his headset. All of it proved nothing, and Aishin could still be just a dedicated fan of Underneath. But... Danika wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that Aishin was Aichi Shinichi. If he was, he was older than she had guessed, but still younger than she was. He also wouldn't be the first famous person that she'd played a game with.

In one of the guilds in one of the games she'd played for years, there'd been a snowboarder of international fame who had promoted his videos in their channel every time he'd shot a new one. Some people had claimed the snowboarder was lying about his identity, and others had simply mocked him for always bragging about his stunts. Danika had always found him too consistent for most liars, and she'd watched the videos and thought that even she might have wanted to brag a little to her friends if she'd been able to perform such feats.

She fell asleep thinking of old friends, old enemies, and how sometimes there was no difference between the two.

--

Several days passed quietly, and yet intensely, as Danika worked on getting old game accounts through the horrible quest that they were locked into. After she got each one through it, the accounts were assigned to other people to level. She kind of wanted to

complain about that, but it didn't go against the contract at all.

At night she played "Living Jade Empire" through the VR-medi pod and caught golden orb spiders for the fairy weaver's strange spider thread spinning contraption. Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion joined her for at least an hour or two each evening, but Aishin was never on in the evenings, although he did send a short greeting message each day.

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Danika's calendar popped up a notification reminding her to send out holiday greetings, and so she wrote another email and sent it to her family group. Her mother had been the only one who'd ever particularly celebrated the time of year, but it was a good reminder to keep in touch.

She also wrote a single letter by hand, and glued pressed flowers saved from her house plants throughout the year to it, to fill the empty space. She addressed it to her father, and then she ventured out to post it through the mail before her shift started.

When Danika logged in after work that night, she was greeted by a blank screen with an event message that read:

"12 Days of Christmas!" Although the word Christmas had been scratched through and replaced with Goblins.

"Some of you may have heard rumors that the God of War has been siding with the Goblin tribes this summer! A vast goblin fortress has been constructed in the northern plains and unseasonal snowstorms have begun sweeping down from the dark northern isles."

"Nadia have been scarce lately, and the portals to their city closed. Only those adventurers who are able to visit the northern isles by traveling beyond the goblin territories will be able to discover why."

"For the next three days (12 days within Living Jade Empire), the Jade Emperor himself has decided to step in and alter the balance between the races by offering an extra point of Karma for every goblin defeated. It is time to reclaim the north!"

Danika read the message twice before dismissing it, and returned to Windbur to find both Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion waiting. MatchlessMinion was practically bouncing with impatience as he quickly explained, "It hasn't actually started yet, but everyone else is already heading north! If we don't hurry there won't be anything left!"

Danika pointed out calmly, "People with quicker methods of travel will always arrive at game events first, but if it hasn't actually started yet, shouldn't we avoid running into goblins early so that there are more to gain Karma from? Doesn't the event sound like the key is actually getting to the northern isles to see why the water elementals are scarce? I might be able to fly there eventually, but how would you and Shrubbery get there? I think we should look for a port city and a ship."

Shrubbery laughed quietly and told MatchlessMinion, "See, I told you she'd come up with a better plan as soon as she got here."

After discussing it a little more the three of them informed the fairy weaver that they

wouldn't be catching any more spiders for at least a week and closed the party quest. They'd collected over a thousand spiders and were given a bonus, that was distributed automatically like the coin they'd earned.

Each party member received a small spool of spider thread cord. MatchlessMinion unrolled his to show that its length was over 20 meters, before coiling it back up. Danika replaced the remains of the thread that she'd kept from her adventures in the beginner's vale with hers.

Shrubbery called out to her tree somehow and stepped through a nearby tree to return to the human capital first, to check that the portal to the elven capital was still open. Danika and MatchlessMinion headed down the path that the traveling merchant had used to bring Danika into Windbur as quickly as possible. MatchlessMinion wasn't as fast as Aishin but he could scurry along at an impressive pace.

The two ran into the first goblins of the night right after midnight. Three goblins were also traveling the same path, and appeared to be fleeing for their lives. Danika pulled up her menu lens and told MatchlessMinion, "Stop! They are players!"

MatchlessMinion lowered his blow dart straw and asked, "Do you think they still give extra Karma?"

The three goblins slid to a halt a few paces away and raised their own weapons. The smallest shouted, "We aren't part of the goblin event!"

Danika hovered indecisively, and MatchlessMinion waited for her decision. Danika asked the goblins warily, "Then what are you doing around here? Goblins have been cutting down trees everywhere."

One of the goblin players admitted, "We were also doing missions to collect logs recently, but we don't know anything about the fortress in the event notice, and everyone we've seen since the notice attacks us!"

They did appear to be injured, and their clothing shared the same shredded look that Aishin's often had. MatchlessMinion didn't let down his guard, but he asked, "What do you want to do Captain?"

After another tense moment, Danika said, "I was turned into a cat by eating an apple that a wizard gave me, but it was apparently a very low chance. It lasted for 13 game days though."

One of the goblins asked doubtfully, "And you want us to buy it from you?"

MatchlessMinion spoke up before Danika could and asked sourly, "Did you hear her mention money? Seriously, if she gives it to you and it works, you'd better give her something in return!"

"Fine!" The smallest goblin shouted. "We'll try this apple and if it works we'll pay you all our coin!"

Another goblin added, "It will be worth it if we can be cats for the duration of the event."

Danika removed the rest of the wizard's yellow apple from her inventory, keeping back only the furry looking seed. MatchlessMinion took it from her and split it into three equal portions and gave one to each of the goblins. Danika held her breath as the three exchanged glances and then bit into the apple pieces.

The strange chime rang out softly, and Danika wondered if it were some sort of transformation noise. MatchlessMinion jumped and gave her a startled look as all three goblins transformed into cats of different shades. The smallest one was black, the one who'd said it would be worth it was a tabby similar to Danika's own cat form, and the last became a surprisingly orange striped cat.

They meowed a great deal at first, and Danika was disappointed to discover that despite still having The Way of The Cat on her character sheet, she couldn't understand them at all.

MatchlessMinion reminded them sternly, "Your payment?"

All three cats turned and rummaged in the pouches and bags that lay around them, and began stuffing their fallen outfits into their inventories and pulling out coins. Danika wondered how they would transport their bags until the orange cat began pulling things out of the storage band it still wore and pushing them at the others. They in turn pushed the pouches and bags that they were finished with back to the orange cat.

The stack of coins that sat in front of the three goblin cats a few minutes later when they'd finished sorting themselves out was surprisingly large. MatchlessMinion collected the coins and handed them to ZipZing without a word. Danika giggled as she put them away, and said, "Thanks." She now had enough coin to pay Logical Heart the 20,000 that she owed him without selling any of her seeds.

The three cats replied with a chorus of meows and Danika thought that they looked happy as they set off down the path much more calmly a minute later. Then she and MatchlessMinion turned back toward the west and resumed their own swift travel toward the human capital to meet up with Shrubbery, who had messaged that the portals to both the elven capital in the northeast and the centaur capital in the northwest were still open.

## ***71: Unseasonal Storms***

Danika made a detour in one of the villages when she spotted the traveling merchant. She zipped over to him and he called out a warm greeting as usual as she drew close, "Good afternoon ZipZing! You look like you're in a good mood."

Danika smiled and as MatchlessMinion followed her into the village square, she asked the merchant, "Do you know if we would find more boats for hire on the coasts closer to the centaur capital or to the elven capital?"

The traveling merchant replied cheerfully, "There are many more port towns in the elven lands. Centaurs are rarely nautically inclined. There are still a few port towns along the coast beyond the centaur plains, but they are often predominantly goblin villages. The goblin territories have grown quite dangerous for novices of other races lately, so I would recommend that you keep to the east if you must visit the northern ocean."

Danika frowned and wondered if turning the three goblins into cats had been a mistake. She didn't expect a useful answer, but asked anyway, "Do you know what's happening with the Nadias lately?"

The traveling merchant shrugged and replied, "It seems to be related to the unseasonal snowstorms in the north this summer."

Since that was basically what the event notice had said, Danika simply smiled and replied, "Thanks!" She zipped back to MatchlessMinion and they hurried onward.

MatchlessMinion said, "Asking the merchant seems like cheating."

"He didn't say anything about the Nadias that the event didn't," Danika pointed out.

--

When they reached Fogton, the human capital, Danika sent a message to Logical Heart who had come online while they traveled. The contract had already come due, but he hadn't contacted her.

The little grey bird returned a moment later and for a moment Danika wondered if her message had been undeliverable, but she took the message and read: "Um, if you want to complete the contract right now we can, but I think I can improve it if you give me another few days? Can we complete it after the Christmas event? The system can see that I have a finished stone and that you have enough coin, so it won't take any action on the contract unless one of us activates it."

Danika replied: "Sure, that's fine."

Shrubbery, MatchlessMinion and ZipZing passed through the portal to Tamworth, the elven capital, a little bit later.

Danika flinched as the elves nearby turned to gaze at the little party and pointed and talked to each other in elven, but none of them made any hostile movements and the few words her language skill translated for her were things like, "unusual", "strange", "fairy", "furry", and weirdly enough, "dryad", which Danika was fairly certain had never been

spoken during her last visit.

After some confusion as Danika tried to communicate with the elves, MatchlessMinion announced, "My sister says 'port city' sounds like 'cu osto' in elvish, try that."

Danika repeated the phrase and her language skill changed the sounds a little but the elves nodded and discussed a bit among themselves. One of them actually drew a small map and handed it to Shrubbery.

The words on the little map were all in elvish, but there were recognizable landmarks. The coastline matched the game map fairly well and the tail of the dragon range that swept its curve around the elven territory. There were six dots along the coast and the elf had added stick figure boats beside each dot.

The elf who'd drawn the map tapped the thick line that connected the big circle that was probably Tamworth to the closest coastal dot, and beckoned to Shrubbery. Shrubbery looked at Danika with an uncertain expression. The elf walked a little ways and then turned and beckoned again, and repeated a word that Danika's skill translated as, "come."

Danika said, "We should try following," and led Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion down the path after the elf. The elf took them to a living gateway formed by entwined trees where a broad path exited the city. Danika said, "Thank you," as she zipped onward.

The elf waved cheerfully as the party left, and MatchlessMinion asked suspiciously, "What if it's tricking us?"

Danika squinted at the sky and replied, "I'm pretty sure we're heading northeast, so unless you mean like into an ambush, it should be ok?"

--

Shrubbery could not travel as quickly as Danika or MatchlessMinion, but when she tried to apologize, MatchlessMinion told her firmly, "It's a holiday, we don't have to get up early, there's no rush."

Shrubbery asked, "Are you off tomorrow too ZipZing?"

Danika shook her head but added quickly, "No, but I'll be doing the same job I've been doing all week and I don't have to talk to anyone or be presentable, so it's ok if I'm short on sleep."

"You don't need to push yourself either," MatchlessMinion scolded. "We've got three days, this is just the first night."

"I wonder if we could carry you after you go to sleep?" Shrubbery speculated.

"I don't know," Danika replied with a shrug.

"If we're not to the coast before you're supposed to sleep, or when you're feeling too tired, let's try it," Shrubbery decided.

"Ok," Danika agreed, but she didn't expect the journey to take that long since the distance between the elven capital and the coastline in the game map looked similar to the

distance between the human capital and Oliva. The only problem would be if they ran into trouble along the way.

They passed through a rolling landscape that changed gently from low grassy hillocks to deep forest and back again. Here and there they saw traces of logging as they passed through the forests that showed that not even elven lands had been safe from the goblins recently. Unlike the roads and paths through human territory, there were no elven towns or villages on the path, although occasionally there were paths that branched off beside stone markers with elaborate elven script, that often had small interesting gardens planted around them.

As night fell it began to snow, and MatchlessMinion said, "Ok, it said unseasonal storms and all, but I was expecting light fluffy holiday snow."

"Yeah," Danika agreed with a shiver that made her bring up her menus and check her health, which was full.

Danika struggled against the increasing wind until MatchlessMinion demanded, "Just let one of us carry you ZipZing!"

"If you ride on Match you'll be warmer," Shrubbery pointed out, "he's so fluffy and furry. His character was constantly losing health in the heat when we went south, so it should do great in this."

Danika landed obediently on MatchlessMinion's head, and sighed as her little feet sank into his warm fluffy fur. She asked Shrubbery worriedly, "What about you, are you losing health because of the cold?"

Shrubbery laughed and replied, "I'm half tree so I'm fine anywhere a tree can live, but I am becoming slower I think. I'm kind of like a cold blooded animal I guess?"

MatchlessMinion removed his cloak and handed it to Shrubbery. "I know it'll barely be a cape on you," he said gruffly, "but silk is a good insulator."

Shrubbery only hesitated a moment before accepting it. After she put it on she did seem to walk a little faster.

Danika's feet and belly were comfortably warm against MatchlessMinion's head and even the ordinary animals that they'd caught glimpses of now and then seemed to have vanished with the onset of the storm. After awhile Danika accidentally fell asleep.

--

When her alarm woke her up, the first thing she did was log in to check her messages. She huffed a laugh. ZipZing was alone in an obviously elven town that rose elegantly along a cliff beside a small bay full of small ships with their sails tightly furled. The storm, or another storm lashed everything with spatters of sleet.

MatchlessMinion's messenger animal was a sleek grey cat that matched his chinchillamin's fur. Danika had half expected a dog to contrast with his sister. It carried a fat message that read: "Don't worry! We made it to the coast before your avatar timed out. And I found an innkeeper who speaks the common tongue, who was willing to translate for a small fee, and Shrubbery and I have already arranged a ship for tomorrow evening (in real



time). And warm clothes for us all (we got you a handkerchief to wear as a cloak). We're going to sleep in this morning! See you when you get off work!"

Danika replied, "Ok," and added the local time for when her shift would end.

Aishin's little bat delivered a note that said: "I can play a bit this afternoon, and maybe again really late to hunt more of these Christmas Karma goblins. Let me know where to meet up if you can play then?"

Danika wrote a quick reply explaining a little guiltily that the rest of the party had gone north and her plan was to try to sail to the Nadia city.

SaltySiamese's cat delivered a note that exclaimed: "My brother told me about your plan to sail north! You guys should just join us in our assault on the great goblin fortress! It says that you have to travel beyond the goblins! You'll probably be blocked somehow from going straight there!"

Danika's last reply was simply: "Thanks for worrying about us! We'll find out if you're right."

She logged out and started her day.

Aishin sent her a reply sometime during the afternoon that said: "You're surprisingly daring! Don't die, use the things I gave you if you need to."

--

When Danika logged in that night, MatchlessMinion and Shrubbery were waiting, and the air was still and warm in the dawn light. She looked around in surprise and asked, "The storm stopped?"

MatchlessMinion replied quickly, "It's temporary, apparently the storms have all begun in the evening and died down toward the end of the night. Let's hurry to our ship! They say it will take a full day to sail to the Nadia capital and they'll land wherever they can if the storm catches us first."

"I thought about suggesting you log in from the mobile app while you were working and let us carry you during the last day, but Match and Salty both think we're likely to run into some event that will prevent us from reaching the Nadias," Shrubbery added.

"I kind of think so too," Danika admitted. "But it seems worth trying?"

"Don't worry, we're with you all the way!" MatchlessMinion declared, and Shrubbery nodded.

## *72: Pirates and Ice*

It was barely afternoon when clouds began to sweep down from the north as their little elven ship sailed into the wind. They had a slightly less limited form of communication with their captain than just Danika's elven language skill. Shrubbery could understand his parrot, who apparently repeated everything he said.

The captain announced, "The storm is coming early, or we are meeting it on its way. We will continue north and hope to reach Wingtip Isle before it gets too fierce, but we won't make it to the Nadia capital today."

When Shrubbery had repeated the words that the parrot had repeated for them, Danika asked simply, "Tomorrow?" She was relieved to hear the echo of the elven word beneath her own.

The captain hesitated, but then replied, "If we make land safely, we can sail on in the morning for 2000 more coin."

After his words were translated again MatchlessMinion declared, "Let's do it."

Danika hesitated and then admitted, "I don't have the coin to spend, I only have 213 coin more than my contract with Logical Heart."

"Are you the only one in this party?" MatchlessMinion demanded.

It was exactly the same thing that Danika had asked him in the past. He had kept attacking before their guild members were ready in the old game they'd played. Shrubbery and Danika both laughed, and Danika grinned and admitted, "No. If you're willing to pay it, I'd appreciate it."

MatchlessMinion said, "I'll pay half of course."

Shrubbery giggled and said, "Ok, I'll pay the rest."

Danika grinned and the captain announced, "More trouble approaches with this storm."

Danika understood the word trouble, so by the time Shrubbery had repeated the parrot's repetition, her grin had long vanished. The three of them looked at the tiny dark dot at the edge of the storm in the far distance as the elven crew cried out in alarm.

The dot soon resolved itself into another sailing vessel as the captain calmly instructed his crew. A familiar black flag flew from its mast. The parrot's endless parroting was shown to be useful to the crew as it continued to repeat the captain's words from the rail at the front of the ship while the captain himself moved around freely, allowing the crew and their three passengers a consistent flow of understandable orders.

The approaching ship was dropping its sails as it tried to slow down, and the first of the cannons fired. Danika gazed incredulously as the the barrage approached the little elven ship. The elves were already organized, and returned fire with arrows that sparkled and flamed with various spells and enchantments.

A wall of water shot up in front of each ship a moment later. Some of the heavy cannon balls of the goblin pirates splashed through their own water wall and smashed into the deck, though more fell into the sea. Shrubbery bent and slapped her hands against one of the deck boards that had broken and a moment later it began to sprout leaves and the broken place grew closed.

The captain took one look and ordered her to go below with shouts and gestures, but Danika stopped him, "She's sun powered!"

Apparently he understood enough of her words, because he cursed and glanced at the sky that was quickly filling with clouds.

A moment later Danika zipped away from the elven ship toward the pirate vessel as the water wall fell away and the elves sent another wave of arrows. She activated her invisibility when she got close, hoping that she'd have been mistaken as just another arrow as she dove through the water wall that still guarded the pirate ship. Apparently the elves were faster with their arrows than the goblins were with their cannons.

The flaming arrows had all been doused, but some of the other arrows had hit and there were strange patches of ice, oil, and weirdly bubbles, scattered across the pirate ship where arrows had hit. A goblin stepped in one of the patches of bubbles and slid across the deck.

Danika glanced around frantically and dove through an open hatch. She renewed her invisibility and streaked through a narrow passage toward the loudest shouts. She spotted what she was looking for with relief. Even in a magical world the cannons were using some kind of flammable powder. She cast as many spark laden light cantrips as she had energy for, sending each particle into an open powder cask, and then fled.

As Danika zipped away from the pirate ship, the wall of water fell behind her, and a harpoon shot past her shoulder as her evasion skill flicked her automatically to the side. The entire side of the pirate ship exploded a moment later in a series of explosions like a firework finale, spitting debris, cannon balls and flaming goblins into the air and the ocean.

A soft chime rang in the distance, but it was not the chime of a skill, and Danika hit the deck of the elven vessel half expecting to land as some other kind of creature. MatchlessMinion caught her in his small hands as she rolled across the deck and the elven ship's wall of water rose again behind her. Danika tapped the storage ring on her wrist and withdrew all three of her energy potions.

"Give one to Shrubbery," she instructed as she popped the stopper of one of the vials and gulped down the potion.

MatchlessMinion didn't ask, he set her gently on the deck and scurried off with the other two vials.

Only one more cannonball and some random missiles of debris hit the ship despite the huge explosion of materials, and the elves dropped their wall of water again and began picking off the survivors. MatchlessMinion joined them, puffing a surprisingly deadly little dart at any goblin who floated close enough and Shrubbery continued to encourage the ship to fill in its own holes.

Danika took the gruesome task of zipping over the waves and using her wind slash to

cut pouches and jewelry free of the bodies, and carried them to Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion with her featherweight spell. One of her skills leveled, but she didn't stop to look.

A few minutes later the sudden sea battle was over. It hadn't even lasted an entire bell. Sleet followed the clouds as the storm closed in over the elven ship, but the captain simply instructed them all to bundle up. He and his crew put on heavy fur-lined coats as Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion pulled out heavy cloaks for themselves. Then they wrapped ZipZing carefully in a silky handkerchief that interfered with her wings, but she didn't complain as she checked her health again just in case the shivering was a warning.

The crew sailed into the storm with triumphant faces. The little elven ship zigged and zagged as they tacked against the heavy winds. The elves used spells to knock the ice that formed on the sails off every few minutes. Less than an hour later they sailed into a cozy harbor with tall cliffs that blocked the north wind. They had safely reached Wingtip Isle.

After a brief discussion, that included the elf captain, the three logged out for a couple of hours.

--

Danika pulled herself out of the cool environment of the VR-medi pod and onto the warm floor with surprise. She checked the VR-medi pod's logs and even though she'd felt so cold and her room felt quite warm by comparison, it said it had only lowered the temperature on her by a few degrees.

After a moment of thought she did a few of her usual morning exercises and tried to boost her circulation before fixing a light supper. After she finished her food she spent a few minutes beside her window watching real snow fall in gentle flakes in the glow of the streetlights. Windows in the building directly across from her window glowed and twinkled here and there with people's Christmas decorations. In one window a real candle flame flickered alone, like a whisper of older traditions.

Danika set her alarms up first after returning to the confines of the VR-medi pod, and then returned to Wingtip Isle. The traveling merchant greeted her cheerfully, "Welcome back ZipZing, did you rest well?"

Danika thought about it for a moment and then nodded. She waddled over to him and asked, "Do you have any sort of winter outfit that might be less cumbersome than this scarf?"

The traveling merchant grinned at her with obvious amusement and replied, "I might have warmer options, but I don't think any of them would be less cumbersome. A furry hat to hide yourself in, for example?"

In the end she decided to trade some of the jewelry she'd stolen from the dead goblin pirates for more healing and energy potions instead. Dawn was just starting to lighten the sky when she asked, "Aren't you here awfully early?"

The merchant winked at her and replied, "But I hear that your ship sails north at dawn."

Danika glanced toward the dock, but delayed long enough to ask, "Do you have any

advice for us?"

The merchant gave her another smile and replied, "Don't annoy the black turtle." He lifted his pack and called out, "Good luck ZipZing!" as he strode off into the narrow streets.

Danika stuffed her makeshift covering into her inventory, activated her wings, and zipped toward the elven ship. The air here was much chillier than the previous morning on the elven coast. Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion were waiting aboard the ship, and greeted her happily.

Shrubbery exclaimed, "The captain gave me an enchanted pearl that he says will let someone breathe underwater for a whole bell, in exchange for helping repair the ship!"

"Nice!" Danika replied happily.

MatchlessMinion said smugly, "My sister has been bragging about how many goblins she's killing with everyone else at that fortress on the plains, but I finished off over 20 goblins with my darts, so I've got more Karma saved up now than she does."

"She hasn't killed 20 yet?" Danika asked with surprise as the ship began to move.

"She claims she has killed 28," MatchlessMinion admitted, "but even with wizards like Justin the Grey bombarding the fortress with fire, it won't burn for some reason, so they're having a tough fight."

### ***73: Black Turtle***

"Are you going to be ok staying up tonight?" Shrubbery asked again. "You're on the ship, so won't you just appear on the ship if you log out to sleep and log back in in the morning?"

"Maybe, but it would be horrible to find out that I reappear in the middle of the ocean instead. I'll be ok," Danika said reassuringly. "The traveling merchant said that we shouldn't annoy the black turtle."

"What does that mean? And how did the merchant get to the island?" MatchlessMinion asked with a frown.

Danika shrugged and replied, "I don't know, but I suspect we'll find out. Maybe he travels like a messenger animal? Or maybe there's a portal in that town?"

--

The storms found them midmorning, and soon they were only making progress by zigzagging into the wind again. It began to snow after a while, but at least it was no longer freezing sleet, and instead was actual white flakes of snow.

Danika caught a flake in her claws, from where she perched on MatchlessMinion's warm head again wrapped in the silk cloth. She tucked it into the open spot in her main storage ring beside the two pouches. It glittered in her inventory screen without melting while she watched it for a minute.

The winds dropped and so did the temperature as they moved north. Eventually the air became still, and the cold became so piercing that only MatchlessMinion's health wasn't slowly dropping. Danika shared out the last of her candy, but worried that soon they would need to use the health potions.

The ship kept moving north slowly, apparently powered by an alternate use of the spell that had thrown up the defensive water wall. Danika was a little surprised that the captain hadn't insisted on turning back, but the big surprise occurred a while later, when they reached a strange line in the water that turned out to be ice.

The elves launched the little ship up onto the ice with their water wall. It tilted dangerously as they hopped out onto the wet ice and affixed what looked like a large pontoon to the upper side, then pushed the ship over onto it, and affixed a duplicate contraption on the other side. The pontoons were inflated, and a moment later they all climbed back aboard their small ship, and the entire vessel began skating across the bumpy ice.

A breeze picked up awhile later, and the exhausted elven spell casters who'd been propelling the little ship with their water spells were tucked into the little ship's galley to huddle beside its stove and rest, while the rest of the crew raised the sails once more. They made good progress across the ice until they spotted the dolphin.

It was frozen half in and half out of the ice, and its head was bloody, as though it had bashed its way upward into the air. The elves dropped their sails and the ship slid to a halt a little way beyond where they'd seen it. Without even a moment of discussion, three of the

elves leaped onto the ice and ran back toward the dolphin.

The captain spoke to the three players for a moment, but his words were too complex for Danika's skill. The parrot repeated and shrubbery translated: "Dolphins are a sailor's luck, they aid us whenever they can, and we should do the same. We will not continue on until we have done all we can."

"Ok," Danika replied, and the captain smiled at them.

A moment later Danika removed her silk cover and zipped after the elven sailors. They already had the dolphin free of the ice, but it seemed either dead or unconscious, and they were struggling to lift it out of the water. Danika cast her featherweight spell, which had leveled up enough to reduce its weight to  $\frac{1}{3}$  and the elves staggered and then lifted it free.

Danika cautioned, "It will only last 3 minutes." Her skill only translated 3 and minutes, but that seemed to be enough as one of the elves nodded to her and the three raced toward the ship with surprising speed and balance across the ice. The sight reminded Danika of SaltySiamese's claim that elves were cat-like. She shivered.

MatchlessMinion had followed ZipZing off of the ship and was carrying the silk handkerchief. They met up a few meters from the ship and Danika landed on his head without asking, and snatched the cloth when he held it up to her and rolled herself back into it. He made no complaint, and simply followed the elves back onto the ship.

Danika looked at the dolphin where the elves huddled around it, wrapping it in their own blankets, and wondered if she should be using her restore prayer on it. It was emitting pained noises and clicks now. Shrubby said suddenly, "It's not an animal, I can't understand what it's saying."

Danika frowned and used her menu lens to examine the dolphin. Its label was NPC yellow and read: "Sea Song Tione" She tapped to read the rest, and saw that its accumulated level was 63. Its description read: "This young dolphin is already an accomplished bard. He has had an unusually solitary childhood without a family pod, since he's a rare first generation dolphin, with a Nadia mother and a Human father."

Danika instructed MatchlessMinion, "Put me where I can touch the dolphin." He squeezed in between two of the elves and set her down beside the dolphin. Danika reached out and placed her clawed hand against his fin and used her restore prayer. 24 Karma vanished from her character sheet and the dolphin's wounds vanished and it blinked at her and then began to whistle.

Aishin's little bat appeared suddenly and delivered a message: "What are you doing? Your health keeps dropping, Shrubby's too. Have you used all the things I gave you?"

Danika gazed at the message and then admitted in her reply: "I haven't opened your bag, I was assuming you left me something valuable in case I couldn't pay Logical Heart in time. It's the cold." Her little default bird glanced around and streaked off like it never intended to return.

His bat was back a moment later: "I forgot that was due, were you unable to pay it? Is that why you can't warm up inside your garden space?"

Danika blinked and realized that Aishin was right, the stone room would have been very useful. She scribbled another quick reply just as the dolphin's strange little song ended: "I haven't picked it up yet." Her bird vanished with the message almost as quickly as it appeared.

Sea Song Tione said, in the common tongue with a strange tapping beneath his words, "Thank you for saving me!" The elves appeared to be able to understand his words as though he were speaking in elvish, and spoke to him quickly. The dolphin continued, "My mother instructed me to flee south when the Turtle became angry, bared his fangs, and called the ice early." He added guiltily, "But I thought that she was being too fussy because the ocean has never frozen in the summer even when his temple is covered in ice, and I ignored her for too long and the ice caught me."

"The turtle bared its fangs?" MatchlessMinion asked doubtfully.

"Yes," Sea Song Tione replied, "people say the Turtle is angry because someone has been inciting the goblins into an unnecessary war."

Shrubbery, who had come up behind them whispered, "I think he's talking about the God of War who is represented as a half turtle half snake in 'Living Jade Empire'."

Danika gulped and asked the dolphin, "Is he a black turtle?"

Sea Song Tione rolled his eyes at her and replied, "Of course." He looked past her and exclaimed, "Assassin!"

Everyone turned and Danika yelled, "Stop! Don't attack him!" Aishin crouched on the deck barely a meter from her and blocked two attacks from the elves without striking back at them. Danika whirled back to the dolphin and begged, "Tell the elves to stop!"

The dolphin reacted surprisingly quickly, and said, "Please stop, the little fairy dragon seems to know him."

The elves hesitated, and Shrubbery stepped between them and Aishin nervously, and held her hands up while Aishin said weakly, "I need a potion from the bag ZipZing."

Danika shucked her covering and zipped over to him while tapping her storage ring. She pulled out the pouch the bag was in and shivered as she fumbled with opening it. She dropped his bag in front of him a moment later while MatchlessMinion exclaimed questioningly, "What got you?! You've barely got any health left? Is it close?"

Aishin pulled a potion out of the bag and drank before replying wryly, "I got me. It's the price for teleporting to a target wearing my mark." He looked at MatchlessMinion and added, "You don't have much room to talk, your health is dropping too now, and the girls are below half."

He held out a handful of potions. One of the elves reached around Shrubbery and snatched one up. He drank quickly but didn't empty it, and passed it to the elf beside him. Aishin withdrew the potions and glared at the elf.

Danika asked quickly as she shivered, "Their health is dropping now too isn't it?"

MatchlessMinion snatched her up and covered her with the silk handkerchief again.



Aishin looked at them and then nodded. After a moment he held out all but three of the potions, and said, "They can have these if you guys can travel inside the stone." He asked her scoldingly as he watched her shiver again, "Why are you still using VR ZipZing? Even if your character is freezing, you don't have to freeze!"

Danika blinked at him and then laughed. All the elves stared at her. "I never thought about it," she admitted.

It took some discussion, but the young dolphin bard helped convince the elves once Aishin explained what he wanted them to do. Shortly they were all crowded into Aishin's stone room while they talked, even the dolphin. A few minutes later the captain and two of his elves, wearing the coats of the rest over their own returned to the ship and sailed north. The poor half frozen parrot was left behind in the stone room with everyone else.

## 74: The God of War

Danika was surprised that the elves were still willing to keep heading north into the increasingly bitter cold, but when she commented on it, Sea Song Tione explained, "They said you've saved all their lives during your journey, not just mine. They said they have heard the sound of your great luck ring out, and that they think that if anyone has a chance to calm the Turtle, you will."

The elves all nodded at his words. The comfortable temperature of the stone room lured Danika into a yawn. When she yawned again a few moments later, Aishin said, "Just go to sleep. The captain said that we won't arrive for at least a day."

"That's what I suggested, but she says we don't know if she'll reappear on the ship or in the sea," Shrubbery explained.

Aishin smiled and replied, "You always reappear wherever the vessel or creature you were riding stopped, usually that's its destination, but sometimes an event will have interrupted it. I've logged off mid journey many times. However I've been playing with it some, and I'm pretty sure that you'll simply reappear in this space regardless of where the ship is."

"What if someone steals it while we're in here?" MatchlessMinion questioned.

"That's possible," Aishin agreed, "but I asked one of my guild members to try to move it while I was inside the other morning, and he could move it, but he couldn't put it into his inventory. So if anyone steals it, we can just step out of the stone and deal with them." He touched the hilt of his sword suggestively.

MatchlessMinion gave Aishin a fierce grin and then turned and instructed, "Go sleep ZipZing. I can stay up all night if it looks like there's any reason to, and we'll make sure the stone is somewhere safe before the last person logs out."

Danika hesitated and asked, "If you're all sure?"

Aishin, Shrubbery, and MatchlessMinion all nodded immediately and Sea Song Tione spoke up, "Rest without worry, I'm certain that all will be well."

Danika looked at the optimistic dolphin wrapped in an elven blanket and lying upon a waterless floor doubtfully. "Will you be alright out of water for so long?" she asked.

"Of course!" The dolphin assured her. "I am usually not very comfortable out of water," it admitted, "but this blanket is surprisingly comfortable even though I can't move around well."

One of the elves said something, and Aishin told ZipZing, "The elf says the blanket is enchanted, don't worry and go sleep."

"Ok," Danika agreed, and logged off.

--

She checked her "Living Jade Empire" messages before starting her shift. She had

one from each of them. Aishin's read: "The elves actually reached the Nadia city that night, so only a few hours after you logged off, Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion told me when your shift is supposed to end, and I'll arrange to be able to play for a few hours then tonight. You know, I kind of suspected you of being a NEET because you play so much, congrats on the regular job if that's a new thing?"

Danika sent him an indignant reply: "I've never been a NEET! Ever since I finished school I've always worked enough to support myself, even if it's not always with a regular job."

MatchlessMinion's message read: "You have got to see the Nadia city! Apparently it freezes like this every winter, so inns and things are still open. We got rooms for both us and the elven crew who volunteered to wait a week and return us to the continent if we want. I guess that explains how they could modify their ship to run on the ice so easily."

Danika replied: "Cool, looking forward to it."

Shrubbery's message read: "We're returning to the hospital this morning, don't wait for me if I'm late."

Danika grimaced. After a long moment she replied: "Ok, wishing you luck. Don't worry about the game."

She checked her messages again at each break, but there were only two short replies, a " ;)" Sorry" from Aishin, and a "Thanks" from Shrubbery.

--

Danika felt weirdly enervated by her shift, and at the same time invigorated by the anticipation of meeting the black turtle that might be the God of War. When she pulled herself into the VR-medi pod as soon as her shift ended and logged in, Aishin and MatchlessMinion were waiting in the stone room with the dolphin.

MatchlessMinion's fluffy rotund figure was bouncing with impatience, and even his whiskers quivered. Danika grinned with the sudden realization that it wasn't just her own wings that reflected her emotions all the time. The little chinchillamin's ears, whiskers, and tail showed his just as much.

Aishin grinned at her and beckoned before touching the center stone and leaving the room, while MatchlessMinion exclaimed, "Finally! Come on, you've got to see this place!"

Danika zipped over to touch the center stone and repeated Aishin's, "Exit." MatchlessMinion appeared beside her a moment later, and Aishin bent and lifted the stone from its place on the floor in the center of the cozy room. Danika looked around with puzzlement.

Aishin explained, "He meant the city outside of the inn."

MatchlessMinion already had the door open and was beckoning a moment later. Danika followed him and he scurried up a long spiral staircase dotted with doors to a tiny conical room at the top with small round windows and a single door that led out onto the ice. Aishin was right behind her as she exited through what turned out to be the peak of the inn.

MatchlessMinion conscientiously closed the door behind them, trapping the warmer air inside the inn, while Danika looked around. The Nadia city was amazing, and she suspected impossible in the real world. It was mostly submerged in a wide bay, and the ice beneath their feet was as clear as glass. Only the tops of the shell-like structures poked above the surface, but most of them had entrances built into them at this level. Looking into the ice was like looking down into a sparkling city of shelly skyscrapers.

Tiny semi-translucent blue people skated comfortably about the ice. Some of them wore outfits of glittering shells and puffy white fur, others streaked about naked except for their jewelry, showing that they were all strangely androgynous. Corridors had been cut through the ice here and there beneath the surface and more Nadias traveled through the tunnels.

MatchlessMinion pointed to a taller spire at the edge of the bay, looking out across the ocean, and said, "That's the Turtle's temple."

Aishin and MatchlessMinion traveled across the ice less gracefully than the tiny citizens, who occasionally paused to watch their progress, but without much difficulty. Danika simply zipped along beside them. The air here was still freezing cold, but without the deadly bite that the last day of their voyage had held.

There was no complicated ritual, or payment, or any of the grand adventure that Danika would have expected to be required to visit a God. There weren't even any guards, and they simply walked into the upper entrance to the turtle's temple. The walls of the human proportioned spiraling corridor appeared to be carved from white shell or bone, and decorated with motifs of black snakes and sea turtles in various poses, together and apart.

The corridor ended with an open archway leading into a vast dome shaped space, with deep skylights carved into the upper arches. Danika wondered if they'd really traveled far enough through the spiraling corridor for the room to physically match the outer structure, or if they were in another space. The black turtle waited in the center of the room in a deep circular pool of ice. A large ice covered opening, beside the archway they had entered through, looked out into the ice bound Nadia city.

Aishin and MatchlessMinion were both looking at her expectantly, so after a moment Danika flew toward the enormous turtle and said brilliantly, "Um, hello?" As she drew closer she realized that the turtle's reptilian head had eyes that were lidless like a snake.

MatchlessMinion rolled his eyes and made faces at her, but jumped when the black turtle replied in a thunderous voice, "Greetings little mortals. Bring out the rest of your companions from the space that the Assassin hides."

Danika spun and sent Aishin a questioning look. Aishin blinked and carefully set down the stone room, he vanished and reappeared a moment later with Sea Song Tione and Shrubbery. Shrubbery gave her a shy wave.

Danika turned back and looked at the black Turtle expectantly. The turtle huffed a breath which made her shiver and blew her backward a little, but she zipped back to the spot she'd stopped at, and asked forthrightly, "Why are you freezing the north out of season?"

The turtle narrowed his dark eyes at her, and fixed her in his unblinking gaze which

seemed to paralyze everything but the flutter of her wings before replying, "The balance must be restored. I have determined that since such a large imbalance has been created within the goblin tribes, the most efficient method is to flood the plains before the season turns, leaving time for the affected populations to recover before winter."

Danika thought of how the event had announced rumors that the Goblins were being aided by the God of War versus the dolphin's story about his anger that someone was aiding the goblins. After a long moment she asked hesitantly, "Are you the God of War or the God of Balance?"

The black turtle with snake-like eyes opened his mouth and showed his fangs as he laughed. His laughter blew her backward, but Aishin stepped forward into the brief gale of laughter and caught her this time. The turtle informed them, "I am both. I am the great leveler of the sublime balance within the Empire and the dealer of just retribution. I assist all races that are in danger of extinction, and cull those who become dangerously numerous. It is my duty."

Danika stood on Aishin's hands and asked, "But won't the Karma bonus that the Jade Emperor has offered for the defeat of the goblins balance the population without a flood?"

The turtle replied darkly, "That meddler cannot be trusted, he is always changing the rules and borrowing the powers of others."

Danika switched tactics by asking, "Don't the storms that have been sweeping south need the power of the Dragon God of the east?"

A soft chime rang, and Sea Song Tione shouted, "I heard it! I heard the ring of your great luck!"

## *75: The God of Balance*

The black Turtle snapped with annoyance, "The Dragon doesn't oversee every little storm personally!"

A misty fog seemed to be filling the room, and Danika shivered as the fog seemed to slither around the room. She regretted the question, but it had sounded like asking what the Jade Emperor had borrowed would have annoyed him too. She wondered if they would live through her having annoyed the black Turtle despite the merchant's caution.

The fog coalesced a moment later into the form of a blue-green oriental dragon, that shivered and reduced itself within the blink of an eye to a tall woman with oriental features who was dressed in the same type of elaborate robes that the Jade Emperor and his celestial servants wore.

The woman looked at the turtle and smiled, before saying, "How fortunate that one of my children graced with great luck spoke of me in your presence. Let us be civil and discuss your use of my storms in your latest war, when they should be grazing freely in the upper atmosphere and storing up energy for storming in the fall."

The black Turtle seemed to tremble before her, and then transformed into a tall man with dark hair and similar oriental features and robes, standing on a dark empty circle of mirror smooth ice, where the enormous turtle had been embedded in the pool. He lifted his chin and declared stubbornly, "It is the most efficient way!"

Danika glanced at Sea Song Tione who was bouncing with glee in his blanket as he watched the gods with open mouthed awe. She squeaked, and then cleared her voice and objected, "But it's not very just?"

Both gods turned to look at her, and Danika would have fallen if Aishin hadn't stood fast before their gazes and continued to support her with his hands. After a moment Danika explained quickly, "This dolphin, and likely many other innocent creatures have been hurt by the sudden unseasonal ice in the northern ocean."

The Dragon gave her a small smile, while the Turtle frowned at her and then turned his gaze upon the dolphin. Danika wished she hadn't spoken, since both expressions seemed ominous to her.

MatchlessMinion suddenly began to shudder and exclaimed, "No!" His avatar flickered beneath everyone's startled eyes and vanished. It reappeared a moment later and SaltySiamese's voice exclaimed, "Oh wow! You weren't lying!"

The Turtle asked, "You are also dual natured little Thief? Your body doesn't represent this."

Danika launched herself from Aishin's hands and zipped between the gods and MatchlessMinion. "Please don't do anything to his body!" she exclaimed. "He's not dual natured, it's his sister stealing his account for a minute!"

"Borrowing," SaltySiamese corrected huffily from her brother's chinchillamin.

The Dragon narrowed her eyes with amusement and said gently, "Siblings do tend to

borrow things without asking now and then."

The Turtle grumbled, "It's the most efficient way," he looked at Sea Song Tione and admitted, "although it is good that the little bard was rescued, there will inevitably be some collateral damage."

Danika whispered, "How is the goblin hunting going? Have you guys managed to destroy the fortress yet?"

SaltySiamese answered quietly, "It won't burn, we've broken into it a few times, but only some of the beta players can survive for long inside."

The Turtle said sharply, "Of course it won't burn, it has my ice built into it! Only the Bird's own fire could burn it."

The Dragon laughed toothily and hid her mouth behind her long sleeve as she commented, "It was so careless of you to lose your staff."

Aishin spoke up suddenly, and asked, "Won't the fortress be immune to a flood of your own power then?"

The Dragon chuckled and answered first, "Of course not, water and ice are their own opposites in a way, and the Turtle has always been dual natured."

The Turtle grumbled, "I didn't lose it, I know exactly where it is. But it cannot be held by a mortal, so that knowledge won't help these mortals."

Danika asked, with a wide eyed questioning stare at the god, "Wouldn't it just be simpler if you went and got it then?"

The Dragon smiled and said, "It sounds easy doesn't it?"

The Turtle glared at the Dragon and grumbled, "I cannot take it from where the Emperor has placed it."

Danika frowned again and asked, "But you can wash it away? Was it really the Jade Emperor and not one of the celestial servants?" She felt fairly certain that the Christmas Goblin quest was not an automatically generated quest. But the winter storms generated by the angry Turtle also seemed to be part of it, and trying to figure out the logical boundaries of the quest was making her head ache.

Aishin said thoughtfully, "If you can reclaim it as soon as it's no longer where the Emperor placed it, can't you just give us a way to move it?"

Sea Song Tione exclaimed, "Oh, how clever! I wish I had legs so that I could go to the goblin fortress and watch you steal the dark Turtle's staff from the Jade Emperor!"

Danika winced and said, "When you put it that way, it sounds like a really bad idea."

The Dragon said, "I think my child's question is valid, are you certain it was placed by the Emperor and not one of his servants?"

Danika glanced at the god and thought that her oriental dragon form didn't resemble

the dragon the Sandman had shown her. She decided that the dragon must not be speaking literally when she referred to ZipZing as her child.

The Turtle gazed into the distance for a moment and then frowned and shook his head. "I cannot call it, it has been placed with the Emperor's power."

Aishin asked, "Why do you have your power stored in a staff, when you can still use it without it?"

The Dragon covered her mouth and laughed again. "He is lazy," she explained.

"Busy!" the Turtle snapped. "I don't have time to sit here every winter!"

Sea Song Tione piped up, "I have been here hundreds of times with my mother and we have never seen the black Turtle in person before!"

The Turtle looked at the Dragon and offered, "I'll release your storms to their rest if you will arrange to move my staff."

The Dragon narrowed her eyes and murmured, "You will owe me a favor and you will have to slow the sea when you release the ice."

The Turtle nodded and said, "I know."

The Dragon turned suddenly and looked past ZipZing and Aishin to gaze at Shrubbery. All the leaves and flowers in Shrubbery's hair trembled. The Dragon said, "The goblin fortress is built from logs. The staff need only be shifted a human handspan."

Shrubbery gasped and Danika's eyes widened. The Dragon shifted her gaze to ZipZing, and then looked past her, to Sea Song Tione. "The dolphin should be able to sense the proximity of the Turtle's power, if you can come up with some way to transport him."

MatchlessMinion questioned in SaltySiamese's voice, "But no one has been able to reach the center of the goblin fortress yet?"

The dragon smiled toothily and asked, "Little mortal sibling of the tasty little thief, let your brother and the assassin use their stealth."

Danika clamped her mouth shut. She was not going to ask, 'What should I be doing,' nor, 'What will you be doing that the Turtle will owe you a favor for?' The Dragon looked at her as though she could read those treacherous thoughts, and said, "And you, little dragon, you will call me once to clear the way when your party can go no further."

A tight band of jade shaped like a dragon coalesced around Danika's wrist opposite her storage ring.

SaltySiamese complained, "Fine!" But before she returned the character to her brother she told Danika fiercely, "We will prepare for your entrance! Don't take too long getting here!"

The Dragon replied, "They will travel as fast as my winds will carry them." She turned to the Turtle, who nodded his head and horrific groan rang throughout the entire Nadia city



a moment later as he shifted back into his enormous black Turtle form.

"If you are successful, this method will indeed be more just, and you will have my thanks," the black Turtle declared gustily. The ice beneath him shivered and liquefied. He sank into the dark water and then dove quickly out of sight.

The Dragon instructed, "Return to your ship and prepare for the wind as quickly as possible." Her form shivered, and the Dragon dove into the dark water after the Turtle and was gone.

They all turned and looked at the archways behind them as MatchlessMinion disconnected and reconnected. The opening to the city was no longer covered with ice, but some sort of barrier still shimmered against the water, leaving the temple filled with air apart from a shallow pool that provided access to water dwellers.

"Even if we run back up the corridor to the surface, how will we get back to the inn? How far away is the ship?" Danika asked doubtfully.

Aishin turned to Sea Song Tione and asked, "Can you carry the stone room to the inn, and then to where the elven ship is after we've collected the elves?"

The dolphin asked eagerly, "Which inn?"

MatchlessMinion said sourly, "Sheltinn."

"I can do it!" Sea Song Tione declared. He wriggled within his blanket and added, "If you can move me to the entrance first?"

Danika zipped over and cast her featherweight on him, and then Aishin grabbed the blanket and pulled the dolphin over to the entrance and rolled him out of the blanket and into the water. He set down the stone and said, "Everyone back in."

Danika zipped down and tapped the stone and said, "Darkheart." Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion appeared inside the room a moment later, and Aishin followed quickly.

"How will we know when to exit?" Danika asked.

All three of her companions looked at her and Shrubbery asked, "Haven't you sent Sea Song Tione a friend request yet? He accepted mine right away."

Danika covered her face which did nothing to hide her embarrassment as her wings sparkled. A moment later she called up her menus and sent the request to the NPC. It was accepted instantly.

Aishin said, "I should add him to the party too if we have to carry him into the goblin fortress, in case we somehow get separated." A moment later Sea Song Tione appeared in their party list, and they each received a message carried by a small flying fish that read, "Here!"

## *76: The God of Storms*

Aishin instructed, "Just wait here, since none of you speak elvish well." He touched the center stone and vanished.

It seemed to take a long time, but Danika checked her bio screen several times and it was actually only a handful of minutes before Aishin and all of the elves crowded into the stone room.

A few minutes later Sea Song Tione messaged again: "I've set the stone on the dock, but it's barely on the edge, be careful."

Danika said quickly, "I'll go first and move it over." She exited the stone, activated her wings, and looked around. The dolphin had taken them right up to the elven ship. In the distance she could see the city's portal which had a bustling crowd gathered in front of it, and seemed to be functional again.

She grabbed the stone from the edge of the plank it lay upon and used her featherweight spell to move it onto the ship. Then she popped back into the stone room and said, "Ok, we're on the ship."

The elves exited quickly, and they all followed a moment later. Aishin bent and scooped up his stone, held it over the side and told the dolphin, "If the dragon is going to blow us to the continent that quickly, I think you'd better ride in the stone?"

"I want to at least ride on the deck so I can watch!" Sea Song Tione protested. "Just use it to lift me up there," he added as he entered the stone. Aishin set it on the deck and a moment later the dolphin reappeared.

One of the elves wrapped Sea Song Tione gently back into the elven blanket, and then to the dolphin's shock, tied him down to the deck like luggage. The elf spoke to Aishin in a serious tone, and Danika's skill let her hear, "danger", "dragon", and "in the".

Aishin nodded and said a few words in elvish. Then he turned and told them, "He says it would be best if we all ride in the stone room and that he'll make sure it won't be able to fall off the ship." While he spoke the elf put a blob of some sticky substance on the deck beside the dolphin and moved the stone into it and pressed down while casting what looked like an ice spell.

Danika pouted and said, "I kind of want to watch like the dolphin."

Aishin snatched her out of the air and knelt beside the stone. "We're going inside as soon as I decide it's too dangerous," he declared.

Danika glared up at him for a moment. MatchlessMinion and Shrubbery crowded closer and touched the stone with their toes. Danika glanced at them questioningly.

MatchlessMinion's furry cheeks rose to almost hide his eyes as he said gleefully, "If we're going to make it to the goblin fortress in time to get inside and move the staff before the Christmas event ends, we'll probably be traveling at least a hundred kilometers an hour!"

"Oh," Danika replied.

A moment later a gust of wind whipped the sails that the elves had raised into full bells and the ship rose in the water until only its keel touched. Shrubbery's hair blew forward so hard that it began losing petals and leaves, and she was the first to re-enter the stone.

MatchlessMinion's fur whipped in the wind and he squinted at the horizon and asked, "Does it look like there are hundreds of dragons on the edges of the storm to you guys?"

Danika craned her head around to look behind them, while Sea Song Tione rolled his eyes backward and exclaimed, "Oooh, I see them!"

Behind them the clouds seemed to be boiling, and serpentine shapes writhed within them. A more distinct blue-green shape separated from the leading edge and flew forward until it was directly overhead. The Dragon said simply, in a voice they could all hear, "Hold on tight little mortals."

Things creaked ominously, but nothing broke as the ship flew forward. A wave rose around and beneath them at the same time. Danika clung to Aishin's fingers and wondered if they were going to flood the plains after all, and arrive like a tsunami. MatchlessMinion's large round ears were pinned down by the wind as he turned to look at the ocean ahead and his little feet started to skid forward. He vanished into the stone a moment later.

Danika looked around and saw that all of the elves had tied themselves to something at their various posts. Sea Song Tione shouted over the wind, "This is soooooo awesome!"

Aishin crouched lower and placed his hands and Danika against the stone. He squinted against the wind like MatchlessMinion had, and said, "I don't think we should wait much longer."

The wind was fierce enough that his sword shivered against its straps across his back, and after a moment, Danika looked around once more, and then up at the belly of the Dragon God. She wondered if the Turtle was below them. Sea Song Tione shouted, "I'll message as soon as I see land!"

"Thank you!" Danika shouted back, and then whispered "darkheart". Aishin appeared beside her less than a heartbeat later.

After sitting around for a minute, Aishin said, "I'm going to go work on stuff so that I can stay on as late as we need to later. I'll keep the messenger layer open on my phone."

"Ok," Danika replied, and Aishin logged out.

Shrubbery said, "Good idea, me too!" She logged off a second later.

MatchlessMinion shrugged and said, "I don't have anything I have to do, but I could eat something?"

Danika laughed and agreed, "Sure, let's do that. It sounds like we're going to play really late tonight."

"Yeah," he agreed cheerfully and they both logged out a moment later.

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Danika was the first to return to the stone room. She was too impatient to wait for the dolphin's message, and kind of wanted to be ready to pop out and watch the end of their voyage. MatchlessMinion was the next to return, and Shrubbery followed a few minutes later.

MatchlessMinion was exchanging a string of messages with his sister and their two cats were in and out of the little stone room. He explained after a bit, "She is actually being pretty useful. She arranged for Ranma to meet us at the centaur city where she says the river narrows too much for sea going vessels."

"SaltySiamese has always been a good raid leader," Danika pointed out.

"I guess so," MatchlessMinion agreed grudgingly, "but don't ever let her have her own town."

Shrubbery giggled. When Danika looked at her she explained, "She wastes all the resources on cats and decorations, and forgets to build all the production buildings."

Danika blinked and asked, "Can a player even own a town in 'Living Jade Empire'?"

"I don't know, but I don't see why not? You can buy land and buildings." MatchlessMinion pointed out.

Sea Song Tione's message arrived a few minutes later. It read simply: "Land!"

Danika was the first to reach the center stone, but both MatchlessMinion and Shrubbery were close behind. The wind caught at her wings, but she sank her little claws into the deck and held on with her dragon strength. Beside her Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion caught the line that one of the elves tossed downwind for them with startling accuracy.

They approached the edge of the continent swiftly, but Danika thought that the winds were dropping, and the wave beneath the ship subsided as they approached the wide mouth of a river. As they splashed through the point where the currents met, they could see the water splash against the shores on either side, rising just above the highest water marks, and then subsiding.

Danika huffed a sigh of relief. They wouldn't be arriving as a tsunami. The storm overhead began to disperse as they traveled inland on the river, but the Dragon still guided the little ship forward hard enough with her winds to make swift progress against the river's current.

Danika looked over at Sea Song Tione who was strangely quiet and asked worriedly, "Are you ok?"

He didn't reply immediately, and MatchlessMinion skittered over to him, while still clutching the sailor's line firmly, and poked him. "Are you ok?" He shouted at the dolphin.

The dolphin rolled his eyes and replied happily, "I'm great! I'm just trying to remember everything for my songs!"

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When they reached the centaur town, a tall grey horse with white dapples was waiting at the docks beside two shorter backed centaurs. "Match! Shrubbery!" exclaimed the horse as the ship approached the dock.

"He talks?" Danika gasped.

MatchlessMinion rolled his eyes and said, "All players can talk."

The Dragon spoke overhead, "Travel swiftly, and do not call me too soon." She soared upward and vanished into the afternoon sky a moment later.

A few minutes later the elves were wishing them farewell, and Danika had been introduced to Ranma. A quick discussion led to Danika being tied to Ranma's mane while holding Aishin's dark stone. Shrubbery, MatchlessMinion, and Sea Song Tione would ride to the fortress inside the room.

The centaurs accompanying Ranma had been hired to resupply the elven ship, and Danika thanked Ranma for his thoughtfulness as they trotted swiftly out of the interesting centaur city. Danika's brief impression of it reminded her of scenes from Dutch paintings, with pastures bordered in thick beds of brilliant flowers showing through the unseasonal snow, and half timbered buildings dotting the landscape.

Ranma altered between a gallop and a canter and maintained the pace for far longer than Danika thought that a real horse could sustain. The sky was red with a flame colored sunset when he delivered them to SaltySiamese only an hour later. Danika messaged Aishin as SaltySiamese untied her, and then entered the stone room just long enough to inform the others that they'd arrived.

Aishin logged back in and stepped out of the stone a few minutes later, and joined the discussion just as Danika asked, "If I ride on you isn't my stealth enough?"

Quin replied with a frown, "Why risk it?"

MatchlessMinion turned to Aishin and explained quickly, "Quin is one of the few people who've survived inside long enough to see the central tower, so he's insisting that he should just carry us in."

Aishin frowned and Danika looked at his wrinkled brow and exclaimed, "You're home!"

Aishin grinned at her and replied, "Yeah, I'm home. Sit on Quin and hold the stone with your stealth activated and let me see how visible you are to me?"

"Ok!" Danika agreed, and zipped down to grasp the stone and used her featherweight to carry it to Quin's shoulder where she hooked her claws into his leather armor and activated her skill.

## ***77: Into the Goblin Fortress***

MatchlessMinion glanced at Aishin and started to object, but stopped when he glanced back. He squinted at Quin's shoulder and then said with surprise, "I could see you fine until I looked away, but now I have to look really carefully."

"I didn't use my invisibility yet," Danika agreed.

Aishin frowned for a moment, but then shrugged and said, "I can detect her easily, but my skills are skewed toward that. I do think one of our party should accompany him, if only because the ones in the room will be able to monitor their health and energy in case something happens and there's not enough time to message." He hesitated a moment and then added, "I'd probably be the most useful in a fight, and MatchlessMinion would probably be less detectable, but ZipZing probably has the most mobility?"

Sea Song Tione commented from where he lay beside Shrubbery, "She can also call the Dragon to clear the way once!"

Shrubbery spoke uncertainly, "But that's supposed to be our last resort?"

The traveling merchant approached from a crowd of players nearby and called out cheerfully, "Do any of you need supplies before your adventures this evening?"

MatchlessMinion and Quin were the first to respond. Danika waited until everyone had completed their trades before approaching. The first thing she asked was, "Do you have any advice on our quest to move the staff and do you know how many other players have the same quest?"

Everyone looked at her in surprise, but the traveling merchant replied cheerfully, "You might take a good light along? Of those who headed north, only a few others reached the black Turtle, and none of the survivors had the necessary resources left to accept the quest." He glanced at Sea Song Tione and smiled.

Danika blinked and said, "I see, thank you. How much would a good light cost?"

SaltySiamese spoke up, "You can take the light stone Justin lent me."

The merchant smiled and agreed, "That would probably be sufficient." Danika bought some more candy and potions with her few spare coins, and then the traveling merchant hefted his pack and said, "Good luck to you all. If you don't succeed, there is little doubt that the coming year will have a dark beginning." He strode off.

Danika huffed a dry laugh and Quin commented, "Well, that was a bit ominous wasn't it?"

"If we are successful, the goblins are going to think the year has had a pretty dark beginning instead," MatchlessMinion pointed out.

Aishin asked Sea Song Tione, "Can you sense the staff from here?"

The dolphin closed his eyes a moment and then exclaimed, "Ooh, I really can! It feels like the sea is a little way to the west of here, when really it's far to the north!"

They all turned and looked up at the frosty wooden palisade ringing the fortress's exterior. It was stained red in the fading light. "Ok," Danika said, "then I guess we should carry you a ways into it and have you check again?"

SaltySiamese pulled out a mirror and spoke into it, "I think they're about ready!"

"Ok," Justin's voice replied.

Aishin took the stone and held it down to the dolphin, and then followed him into it. Shrubbery and MatchlessMinion hurried into the stone room a moment later. Danika snatched it up and settled herself on Quin's shoulder and dug her little claws back into his armor before activating her stealth again.

SaltySiamese put away the mirror and raised her bow and Quin nodded. In the distance a great thud sounded, and it repeated again a moment later. "Battering ram," SaltySiamese explained, "since fire doesn't work."

Quin raised his rapier and slashed at the nearest log. Nothing appeared to happen, until Ranma trotted over. He spun neatly, and kicked the log with both hind feet and the log shattered and fell away. Ranma jumped out of the way and SaltySiamese shot the startled goblins the gap in the palisade suddenly revealed. She hit each one in the eye, and they dropped back.

Quin dashed through the gap, leaping over the debris, and dodged another goblin who'd been hidden by the wall. Another pair of arrows shot through the gap, and he darted toward the entrance in the fortress wall that faced the log they'd chosen. The thin blade of his rapier slid accurately into the gap in between the armor fastenings of the door guard, and he barely slowed down as he shoved through the doorway and twisted it free again.

The guard just inside the door got half a shout out before Danika's wind slash tore his throat open. Quin stabbed him a second later and then turned and slammed the door closed and dropped the bar across it. The goblin was still alive, despite everything, but Quin ignored him and dashed along the hall and darted into a staircase.

He bounded upward, taking several stairs at a time. Even inside the fortress the heavy boom of the battering ram could still be heard, and feet thudded nearby as goblins rushed through the inner corridors of the fortress.

Quin paused and pressed against the wall at the top of the stairs. The thudding feet grew louder, and Danika tried something new, she targeted Quin with her invisibility spell, and he vanished from view. A dozen goblins pelted past, and none of them appeared to notice the stealthy fairy dragon clutching tightly to a dark stone and standing frozen in mid air against the cold wall of the stairway.

As soon as they'd passed Quin reappeared as ZipZing's spell expired, and he darted silently into the corridor. He did something to the handle and then opened the second doorway from the stairs and then shut and bolted it again. He turned and picked his way silently through the stacks of rough crates, to a narrow window, and began shifting things enough to clear a bit of the floor.

"Tell the dolphin to come out and check that it's still to the west," Quin instructed softly.

Danika dropped to the floor with the stone, and whispered the entrance word. "We're in, and Sea Song Tione needs to check now," she said quickly. Aishin nodded, MatchlessMinion grinned, and Shrubbery smiled. The dolphin slapped his flipper against the center stone and vanished. Danika followed him back out.

The dolphin already had his eyes closed, and after a moment he reported, "It's closer, still west, and kind of below us?"

"Thanks," Danika said, and Sea Song Tione returned to the stone room. Danika reached for the stone and Quin said, "Wait."

She looked up at him and he beckoned her to the window. She activated her wings and rose high enough to see out the narrow opening and then gasped.

Quin said quietly in a grim voice, "I thought I'd be able to take you farther than this, but that is crazy. There were only a dozen guards patrolling the inner court before."

The fortress's tall narrow central tower was completely separated from the outer square of the building by a paved stone space, and that space was crowded with goblins pressed elbow to elbow. After a moment Danika asked quietly, "Does it look like they're trying to move toward the battering ram?"

As though speaking of it had jinxed it, the rhythmic thud stopped. Quin said suddenly, "Grab the stone, use your invisibility, and fly into that opening directly across from us! If those goblins were all inside the central tower, it'll be empty for a bit."

Danika narrowed her eyes in calculation, and then nodded. She landed beside the stone, tapped her inventory open and withdrew an energy potion and gulped it down first. Then she grasped the stone, used her featherweight and launched herself at the window before casting her invisibility.

ZipZing streaked like an invisible bolt of lightning toward the narrow opening, and then only her evasion skill saved her from smacking into the spiked helm of the bored goblin with a heavy crossbow who was watching the commotion below. Danika zipped over his head and then the weight of the stone tripled as her spell wore off and it pulled her to the floor.

Danika didn't even bother to recast it, she simply rolled across the freezing floor, lifted the stone over her head and scurried forward on her hind legs. She darted through the goblin sized doorway into another staircase. Another heavily armored goblin climbed laboriously upward toward her, but fortunately it was looking at its feet. Danika bounced against the far wall, reoriented herself, then set the stone down as quickly and quietly as possible and whispered, "darkheart".

She let all her air out at once as she appeared in the stone room, which felt quite warm in comparison. She heaved in another deep breath as Aishin and MatchlessMinion shot to their feet, and then she nodded. "We're inside the central tower, Quin is back in the outer fortress." She quickly described the two heavily armored goblins and what she'd seen of the room and the stairs, and explained that she'd left the stone lying on the stairs.

Aishin dropped his hand from his sword and tapped his own storage band, and then withdrew the dagger Danika had withdrawn from his chest almost a month ago. He grinned at her and said, "Then we'll block the stairs a bit," set his foot against the center stone and



snapped, "exit!"

MatchlessMinion and ZipZing appeared a moment later on the cold stairs below him. Aishin had already stabbed the stoning dagger into the goblin's back, leaving it mostly blocking the stair with the bulk of its heavy armor. It must have passed the stone on the stairs while Danika had been inside.

Aishin turned, bent and snatched up the stone, looked at MatchlessMinion and murmured, "Scout downward?"

MatchlessMinion turned and blended into the wall as Danika watched, and only a ripple of motion showed his progress as he scurried downward. Aishin and ZipZing followed more slowly, moving as silently as possible. Aishin froze at the next doorway, and when Danika turned to look, MatchlessMinion was there again, tugging on Aishin's sleeve.

Aishin had to drop to a crouch, but they both followed MatchlessMinion into a little room that looked identical to the one above as far as Danika could tell except it had a door and had no window. MatchlessMinion shut the door softly and whispered, "Dolphin check."

Aishin nodded, and set down the stone, vanished, and then reappeared beside Sea Song Tione a moment later. The dolphin closed his eyes, and then exclaimed excitedly, "It's right beneath us!"

There was a great hissing response as all three of them scolded, "Shh!"

Danika snickered and Aishin grinned at her and shrugged.

## *78: Icy Heart in Darkness*

Sea Song Tione whispered, "Sorry! I'll be quieter." He touched his flipper to the stone and barely breathed, "Darkheart," as he vanished.

MatchlessMinion pressed one large round ear against the cold door, and then used his skill that made him nearly invisible again. The door swung open just enough for a small chinchillamin to slip out.

Aishin snatched up the stone and held up his hand in warning. He folded his fingers down one by one, before opening the door and slipping out first, then beckoned and started down the stairs.

Danika zipped after him.

Aishin halted and backed up a step when they reached the bottom of the stairs. Danika peeked past him and saw that there was only an open space between them and a doorway that had its broad door propped completely open. A stone glowed above the door, and Danika glanced up and saw that the light on the stairs had been provided by more stones embedded in the bottom of the steps above.

Just beyond the entrance to the tower the darkness showed the movements of the press of goblins that she'd seen with Quin. MatchlessMinion whispered softly, "I can't find any logs that seem different."

Somewhere above them a sharp thud sounded, and Aishin hissed, "Something probably pushed past the stoned goblin." He brought up his menus and added, "There are several living beings below us, there has to be a way to get farther down."

A grating sound was followed by more thumps and Danika murmured, "Or they're rolling it down the stairs at us."

The shimmer that was all that she could see of MatchlessMinion scurried along the walls of the space, so Danika activated her invisibility and zipped forward to examine the floor. A flicker of light caught her eye as she zipped over the large stone directly in front of the open doorway and she dropped to the ground and hurried to dig her claws into the little gap.

Danika pried it up with her dragon strength, and a moment later she could feel MatchlessMinion's fur brush against her as he hissed, "Wait a second!"

Danika's invisibility gave out and she renewed it, as the door to the tower slowly swung closed. The goblins outside didn't seem to react, and she heaved on the stone as Aishin darted over and lifted it beyond where she could reach. The thudding grating progress of the stone goblin coming down the stairs grew louder and Danika zipped down into the room the stone had revealed.

A moment later she appeared to explode like a small firework over the heads of the goblins that waited below. She burst her light cantrip in every direction like she had in the clearing she'd planted her radishes in, and activated her strongest dazzle. At the same time MatchlessMinion dropped through the stone trapdoor and silently shot the goblins that had turned to stare at her with his darts. Aishin dropped beside him, and lowered the stone

back into place gently, since he was taller than the occupants the room had been designed to house. Small blades began to hit their targets a second later.

As though they'd worked together a thousand times the three of them took out a full dozen goblins in everything from heavy armor to the robes of mages in under a minute in almost complete silence. Overhead the stone goblin apparently finished its forced descent and voices broke into muffled arguments.

Aishin slit the throats of all of the fallen goblins, and replied quietly to the shocked expressions MatchlessMinion and ZipZing wore, "Just making sure."

After a moment Danika nodded, and asked quietly, "Time to bring out Sea Song Tione again?"

"I still don't see anything that looks like a staff," MatchlessMinion agreed in a whisper, "so yeah."

Aishin set down the stone, entered, and brought out the dolphin again. The noises overhead faded as Sea Song Tione whispered cautiously, "It's still below."

MatchlessMinion popped into the stone and returned with Shrubbery and the whole party searched for another hidden entrance. Aishin shook his head a few minutes later and said softly, "I can't sense anything alive below us, and we're not finding anything."

Danika asked doubtfully, "Is this where we cannot go farther? Should I call the Dragon?"

MatchlessMinion shook his head and said softly, "Let's try prying the floor up like we did that stump?"

Danika pointed out, "We don't have the kind of strength Terri's attack used to lift these stones like that?"

Shrubbery whispered, "If you can find or make a gap, I can make seeds grow underneath, if there's soil below."

Danika dropped to the cobbled floor and used her featherweight spell and her dragon strength to pry one of the smaller cobbles up enough for Shrubbery to stuff a seed beneath it with her long thin fingers.

Shrubbery's growth spell was more advanced than Danika's and she had another spell or skill that let her control how the plant grew. A few moments later cobblestones across the room began to heave themselves out of the ground as the roots of a wizened tree buckled and coiled beneath them.

"There!" Aishin exclaimed quietly. The spot where he was pointing was sinking as the stones around it were pushed up and away, and a moment later that section of cobblestones fell into the darkness below as a solid piece and landed with a muffled thump that sent earthy dust billowing back out of the hole.

Danika pushed an energy potion into Shrubbery's hands and finished the piece of candy she'd been chewing, before zipping over and sending her light cantrip spinning into the darkness. Massive ice covered wooden pillars supported the tower, with dozens of thin

round staff sized beams interlocking across the spaces between them.

"Dolphin," MatchlessMinion stated after the light vanished.

Danika zipped over and cast featherweight on Sea Song Tione, who bounced with excitement. Aishin used the blanket to drag him to the edge, and then dropped through first. He looked up and said doubtfully, "Even if we get him down here, there's not enough space to get him through to the ones around the outer edge."

Danika said practically, "We can just break enough of them to get him through."

Aishin jumped up and grabbed the edge of the blanket and pulled the dolphin down into his arms. Sea Song Tione announced despondently a moment later, "It's no good, I don't think I'll be able to tell even if I'm touching it. It feels like it's everywhere."

Danika suggested, "What about Shrubbery? Maybe she can tell which one isn't really wood?"

Sea Song Tione returned to the stone room and Aishin jumped up and pulled himself back out of the darkness. A moment later he held Shrubbery's hands and lowered her gently into the space he'd stood.

Shrubbery shivered and complained, "It's too dark. I can't do anything."

"SaltySiamese's stone," Danika turned to MatchlessMinion and prompted.

MatchlessMinion blinked and replied, "Oh, yeah!" He pulled it out of his inventory and activated it, before dropping it down to Shrubbery. The little stone blazed like a small fragment of sunshine compared to the small glowing stones embedded in the floor above them.

Shrubbery carefully touched each of the staff sized beams that she could reach, and then shook her head. But instead of having them pull her out and break one, she whispered quietly to one of the staves and it humped itself upward into a curve. Shrubbery wiggled through the gap and tested the next set.

By the time Shrubbery started in on the last corner, they were all beginning to lose hope. Danika asked dolefully, "What if they embedded it inside of one of the main support beams?"

Shrubbery looked up at them, and her eyes sparkled. "I'll ask them!" She announced. "They are dying, but they were cut so recently that none of them are completely dead yet!"

She ignored the last few staves and laid her hands against the ice of the nearest enormous wooden pillar. She shook her head a moment later and moved to the next. She looked up and nodded. "That was it! This one is barely alive and complains that ice is embedded in its heart."

Danika zipped down and handed Shrubbery her last energy potion. "Is there anything else we can do to help?" she asked.

Shrubbery gulped down the potion and then asked, "Do we have any more light? Light and warmth would help I think."

Aishin began stripping the bodies of the goblins they'd killed and tossing the fabric down. "What are you doing?" MatchlessMinion asked.

"Do you have anything that will burn?" Aishin asked in return.

"Oh," MatchlessMinion replied, and a sly grin spread across his face as he answered, "I do. I have oils and waxes." He began pulling things out of his inventory, and passing them down to Shrubbery and ZipZing.

Danika said sadly, "Too bad I bought candy instead of cheese, I've heard cheese burns."

Aishin asked curiously, "Why candy? Can you really taste it through VR?"

Danika replied, "Yeah, or at least, kind of? I'm not sure if I can actually taste it or if I'm just smelling it and think I'm tasting it. Sweet things are the most flavorful that I've tried so far."

Shrubbery commented enviously, "Now I wish I had full VR, I'd love being able to eat sweets without having to wear the calories."

"Me too," Aishin agreed laughingly.

There was a noise overhead and they all froze. It wasn't repeated, and after a minute, Danika whispered, "Is this everything? Should I light it now?"

## *79: Twelfth Night's End*

Aishin asked quietly, "Before you light it should Match and I enter the stone and leave it down there for the two of you to retreat into? What if the whole tower falls?"

"I think that's a good idea," Shrubbery whispered nervously.

"I'm small enough to wait down there with them," MatchlessMinion argued. "You go in first."

"Ok," Aishin agreed after a moment. He entered the stone where the dolphin waited, and MatchlessMinion snatched it up and dropped through the hole. He bounced up from where he'd landed and scurried over to Shrubbery.

Shrubbery said softly, "Ok, light it, and I'll begin."

Danika set her spark cantrip on the pile of fabric, oils, and small pieces of wax in a half a dozen spots before flames began to rise enthusiastically. She hurriedly devoured more candy as she began casting a continuous chain of light cantrips beside Shrubbery, and she activated her dazzling for good measure.

Shrubbery seemed to bloom in the light and she hummed to the wooden pillar which began to creak and groan and suddenly half a dozen of the support staves that pressed against the pillar shattered. MatchlessMinion was fast enough to block the worst of the debris from Shrubbery's back with his own cloak covered back.

Shrubbery was cut in several other places, but her hum didn't falter as she encouraged the pillar to grow roots again and flex itself against the ice, until finally it split open like a tree bent too far in a storm. She stopped humming for a moment and cast her growth spell on the pillar before continuing.

New branches began to slide out of the crack a minute later, pushing a gleaming ice staff forward with their progress. A moment later the Turtle's staff vanished.

Shrubbery sagged against the revived tree, and MatchlessMinion pressed the stone against her and yelled, "Say the entrance word!"

Shrubbery barely whispered a weak "darkheart". She vanished just as a vibration passed through the ground, and ZipZing and MatchlessMinion exchanged a quick glance.

"Go in," Danika commanded. "I'll try to carry everyone out again!"

MatchlessMinion nodded and said firmly, "Darkheart."

Danika zipped over and snatched up the light stone first, and then the dark stone that held the room. After a moment she stuffed the light stone into her inventory and used her featherweight on the dark stone and her own dazzle to navigate out of the dark space.

Before she'd gotten any farther, SaltySiamese's cat messenger appeared and emitted an anxious and demanding meow. The message read, "You should all stop and hide inside your stone! The whole fortress is going to burn down in a minute!"

Danika dropped to the floor and entered the stone, coming out inside the room nose to nose with a very startled looking plushy rodent face. MatchlessMinion asked quickly, "You got her message?"

Danika nodded. "Yeah. How's Shrubbery doing?"

"I'm ok," Shrubbery herself replied.

Danika turned and saw that she was sipping on a potion and did look much better already.

Aishin said speculatively, "So probably Justin the Grey is going to cast his meteor shower and raze the whole fortress?" Danika shot him a glance and he winked at her, and said, "It's ok that one of your friends took a contract on me ZipZing, it wasn't personal."

Danika objected, "He wasn't one of my friends then, and technically he still isn't. Only Quin has ever sent a friend request." She looked at MatchlessMinion and Shrubbery and added quickly, "Not that I have anything against Justin."

Shrubbery giggled and asked, "But you have something for someone else?"

Danika replied thoughtfully, "I guess I kind of have something against that Callie Kyo and her guild?"

Shrubbery rolled her eyes and Aishin grinned, while MatchlessMinion asked sharply, "Oh? When do we go looking for them?"

Aishin complained, "She didn't seem to want to take revenge."

Danika shrugged and agreed, "It doesn't seem important."

SaltySiamese's messenger cat appeared again and delivered a small note to MatchlessMinion, who made a face and said, "She's asking if we're still alive, and ordering us not to come out until she says it's ok. Should I say 'No, we all died! You killed us!'?"

"We don't know if they've killed us yet," Danika pointed out. "We have no way to tell where the stone is and what's going on outside of it. What if it's at the bottom of a pool of lava now?"

"You are not going out first," Aishin declared.

"Wow you're bossy," Sea Song Tione commented.

The dolphin had been so quiet that Danika had almost forgotten his presence, and she blinked at him in surprise, while Aishin froze. After a moment he said contritely, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make it sound like I'm ordering you around ZipZing. It's just that you don't have enough Karma left to revive anymore."

MatchlessMinion said, "If you're wondering, I don't think you should be allowed to go out first either ZipZing."

Shrubbery nodded.

Danika laughed and replied, "Fine, I'll let you all protect me." She looked at the dolphin and asked, "Were you working on your songs again?"

"I was!" Sea Song Tione replied with enthusiasm. His voice fell when he added, "But I can't think of the right phrase to describe the power of the Turtle's staff and have it go with 'in the heart of the dying tree'."

Aishin asked with interest, "Can you sing the part you have finished?"

The dolphin obliged, and Aishin suggested a couple of alternate lines. One of his suggestions made Sea Song Tione say, "Oh, if I go at it that way..." He went silent again for awhile, and they left him to his composing, and talked quietly of other things. Danika felt surprised again by how realistic the NPCs could be, and kind of wanted to ask Aishin what he thought about the bardic composing the dolphin portrayed, but it seemed intrusive.

Finally SaltySiamese's cat returned with another message: "The fires are dying down, where should we look for you?"

MatchlessMinion sent back: "We were underneath the ground floor of the central tower when you ordered us to hide."

Her reply a moment later was: "Quin and I will look for magic in the debris around the tree that appeared there."

Danika asked questioningly, "They burned everything down, but the pillar kept growing?"

Shrubbery said suddenly, "Then I should be the one to check, if we're inside of the tree, it won't hurt me."

MatchlessMinion scrunched up his little furry face and grumbled, "I guess that's logical, but come right back in and report, don't wander around."

Shrubbery grinned at him and replied gently, "Alright." She reached out and touched the center stone and whispered "exit" without waiting. Before they even had time to get nervous, she was back. "It's ok, come out. We are on a branch, but it's not high, and they were all searching right below us."

The entire party followed her back out of the stone room a moment later. Danika even managed to hit Sea Song Tione with another featherweight spell as he rolled off the branch, before he landed on Quin. Salty Siamese shouted, "You won't believe how much Karma Justin got!"

Danika flew a bit higher and surveyed the smoking ruin of the goblin fortress as the sun rose and the twelfth night of the 12 Days of Goblins event ended. A large tree grew where the central tower had stood. Judging from its size, it looked like it had been growing for hundreds of years. Dryad gardeners were obviously a force to be reckoned with as far as trees were concerned.

People were everywhere, looting goblin bodies, and even the bodies of other players who hadn't been able to revive. In some places they were arguing, in others groups were working together industriously. There wasn't a living goblin in sight. She brought up her menu lens and looked down. Justin wore a red PVP flag and had over six thousand Karma,



but no one seemed willing to approach him aside from his own party members.

"Speaking of Karma," Aishin said quickly, "we need a priest who can perform a Balancing."

Justin blinked at him, and then narrowed his eyes. "One is already on the way," he declared, "he's a friend of mine, but he'll do a fair job."

Aishin turned and told Justin seriously, "A friend of yours is fine as long as he doesn't try to kill me. It's not like they can cheat on a Balancing. But I need to give ZipZing some of my Karma while I've got extra from the goblin event, so that she's got enough to revive if she needs to. I owe her."

"It's fine," Danika objected.

Quin laughed. "Justin, you idiot, you didn't tell them what we plan to do," he said with amusement.

Justin grimaced, and then laughed ruefully. "True. She'll have plenty of Karma soon, because we called for a priest of the God of Balance so that the Karma I gained can be split with your party leader, and then leveled between each of the parties members. It seemed like the fair thing to do, since you guys made it so that the fortress would burn."

"Oh," Aishin replied with surprise.

MatchlessMinion said, "Woah! You destroyed the fortress single-handedly?"

## ***80: The Balance***

Terri exclaimed, "He didn't destroy it alone! We all killed tons of goblins too! And a bunch of magic path players cast their big spells right after he did!"

Quin laughed and explained, "But Justin's spell began as soon as the frost vanished, since we were expecting it, and he took out almost all of the exposed goblins that we couldn't reach and set the whole fortress on fire. From the Karma distribution, I'd say the system thinks Justin nearly destroyed the fortress single-handedly."

Danika examined each of the others and they did seem to already have at least a hundred Karma more than before. In their party, only Aishin had gained that much during the event, and most of it had been from the goblins he'd killed before joining them in the north.

When Justin's priest friend met up with them, in his grey robes embroidered with stylized balance scales, Danika wondered if he were aware that the God of Balance and the God of War were the same deity. He had Justin and Aishin clasp hands and chanted a prayer over them that asked his god to level the balance between them. After it finished, Aishin began handing Justin large quantities of coin that Danika was fairly certain he hadn't had before.

Justin said stiffly, "It's not a big deal, you don't have to return it all."

Aishin said firmly, "I don't want to owe you anything."

Danika asked, "It balanced your coin too?"

The priest answered smugly, "It balances all of the status flags, health, energy, Karma and coin. People who try to cheat each other using it are always shocked, but the God of Balance always divides everything but items evenly."

Danika brought her lens back up, and saw that Justin's red PVP status had been reduced to orange and Aishin's had been raised to orange.

Each of Justin's party members joined hands (or in Ranma's case touched shoulders) and the priest repeated the prayer. When it finished, all of them had green PVP flags and equal amounts of Karma. Justin just laughed when they all insisted on following Aishin's example and redistributing their coin back to their original amounts.

Aishin's party was next but before they began, Sea Song Tione asked nervously, "Is it ok for me to remain in the party for this? I really didn't do much?"

Danika asked curiously, "Is the Karma useful to you? We couldn't have done the quest without you."

"I have no idea?" the dolphin replied doubtfully.

MatchlessMinion said, "We'll all have more than we started with, and I feel like something horrible might happen if we get greedy and leave the dolphin the Gods sent with us out."

There was a brief silence as they all considered it and then unanimously agreed that Sea Song Tione should remain in the party. After a bit of shuffling they sat in a circle so that the tiny fairy dragon and the dolphin could join their claws and flippers with the hands of their party members.

Danika asked after the Balancing was completed, "Why did we split it by party instead of doing all of us at once?"

The priest shrugged and replied, "I can only target either two people or an entire party with it."

Aishin examined each of them and announced, "Sea Song Tione didn't get any Karma, nor a PVP flag."

The traveling merchant walked up to them and commented cheerfully, "Only adventurers such as yourselves have such attributes. You have done very well. Please allow me to offer all of the members of both parties a discount on one of your purchases this month?"

Quin's eyes lit up as he asked the traveling merchant eagerly, "How much would a dragon scale be with that discount?"

Danika gave the merchant a startled look and then asked the dolphin seriously, "Should we give you more coin to make it fair?"

"No need!" Sea Song Tione replied quickly.

Danika examined her own inventory and pulled out the old salt sack she stored her coin in. She poured it out and asked, "Who had so much saved up?"

Shrubbery raised her hand shyly. "I don't wear armor and I don't usually need to buy things like food, so I don't spend a lot."

After they sorted all but the coin the dolphin kept back out between them, Danika complained ruefully, "I probably owe you all a bit, since I didn't dare keep less than I owe to Logical Heart. I'm not sure what the contract would do."

Each of them assured her that it was fine, and Aishin looked around and said, "I know we're all tired, but I think we should travel a ways away from here before we log off."

Danika looked around the still smoldering ruins. Beyond the ring marked by where the palisade had stood, the plains were blooming in red and white flowers and warm summer breezes carried the occasional bright petal past the tall tree that rose behind them in lonely splendor. She nodded.

"Sea Song Tione will be trapped in the stone while we're sleeping won't he?" Shrubbery asked worriedly.

Danika looked at the band on her arm that she hadn't used yet. "Let's move away from here and call the Dragon to take him home?" she suggested.

"That seems like kind of a waste of an irreplaceable chance to call on a God for aid," Aishin pointed out.

"Too bad messenger animals can't carry items," Danika complained, "or we could just ask one to carry the stone to the Nadia city."

Everyone stared at her and behind her Quin asked, "Do you have someone on your friend list who's there? You can send items, it just costs Karma."

"No," she admitted.

Ranma offered cheerfully, "Just climb back into your stone and go sleep, it's already almost morning here anyway and I've got nothing I've got to do tomorrow. I'll carry you back to the river town and see if I can find a boat to carry you back to the coast and leave the stone on the shore?"

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Shrubbery asked shyly.

Ranma tossed his head and his mane fell rakishly across his grey forehead as he replied nobly, "It would be an honor to assist a fair maiden and the party that actually solved the goblin quest."

Aishin yawned, and Danika couldn't stop herself from yawning too. Shrubbery giggled as MatchlessMinion yawned as well and told Ranma, "Then we'll gladly accept your kind offer."

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Danika woke up when her alarm went off a few hours later, and almost closed her eyes again, but reminded herself that she still had an important ongoing quest to complete: her contract with the game studio.

For once she skipped her morning exercises, since she'd left herself as much time to sleep as possible, and ate cold fruit and crackers in front of her screen as she worked the next account through the frustrating quest it was trapped in. She logged in to the mobile version on her lunch break, to find ZipZing alone in the stone room except for Aishin's little bat.

His message read: "I dragged Sea Song Tione down to the water as he requested, and he told me to keep the blanket the elves gave him, and that he'll be waiting near the shore for you. Morning comes way too early sometimes. Take the stone with you if you go anywhere? If we all leave it, we'll never find it again."

Danika sent back: "It does. Ok, I'll go talk to him next."

She had ZipZing exit the stone room, and saw that the dark stone blended in with hundreds of others littering the beach. She pondered a moment and tried placing the stone into her inventory. It was almost a shock when it let her place it into her pouch. She actually pulled it back out and entered and exited again to make sure she had the right stone, but it was just that everyone else had already exited the stone.

ZipZing flew toward the water and Danika soon caught sight of a cheerful dolphin who leapt out of the water and a dialogue popped up: "ZipZing! I've been waiting!"

## *81: Clear Blue*

Danika selected the preset response to answer the dolphin: "What do you need of me my friend?"

Sea Song Tione replied: "Nothing except to give you the gift that the dark Turtle told me to give you! Catch!"

Something glittered as it flew out of the water. Danika wasn't as coordinated on her phone and missed catching it. The dolphin laughed and caught it and threw it into the air again. Danika finally got ZipZing to catch it on the third try, and saw that it was a strangely familiar looking shiny blue gem.

She quickly typed "aqua" into the dialogue. Water fountained out of the stone, not a flood, but much more water than the squirrel's stone had dripped. She hastily typed, "desino" and the water stopped.

Sea Song Tione said: "Wow! He was right, you already knew how to use it! He says it's for your garden!"

Danika tapped the automatically generated reply, since it said everything that she wanted to: "Thank you! I will use it well. Good luck in all of your future adventures my friend!"

The dolphin leapt from the water again and a reply popped up: "The same to you! And when you visit the sea again, listen for my songs! Even the whales are singing of our adventures!"

Danika was smiling as she logged out and resumed her work with more energy than she'd shown all day.

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During the afternoon, Danika received a notification that money had been deposited into her account. She checked on her break to see if there were any accompanying messages on any of her accounts. As she'd expected, there weren't and she sagged forward and sighed deeply, but then straightened her posture and lifted her chin. She moved the money into the long term savings account she had set up for what her father sent her.

They had only spoken a few times since the accident that had taken her mother from him. It had been almost as painful to watch him trying so hard not to cry as it had to lose her mother. The worst thing was that Danika believed him when he said that it wasn't her fault and that he didn't blame her for her mother's death, even though at first she'd blamed herself. She'd been the one who'd stayed out too late and then asked her mother to come pick her up on their little scooter. He had at least taken the time to convince her of that much, but it left her no excuse to give him when he couldn't seem to bear to even look at his only child anymore.

Danika glared at the numbers that represented a silent message that he still cared, even if he couldn't bring himself to send even a few digital words. Then she flopped onto her back on the floor in front of her screen and looked over at her window. The sky was a

piercing clear blue that reminded her of the stone that Sea Song Tione had delivered to her.

She smiled wryly and sat up. Then she finished her shift and did the exercises she'd skipped that morning, before she pulled herself back into the VR-medi pod to discover what her next adventure would be and which friends would accompany her.

Danika was greeted by a beautiful beach occupied only by a few animals, a sight that few people would ever have the opportunity to see in this crowded century in the real world. She looked down at the small circle of messenger animals that waited with varying degrees of patience, and laughed.

She read SaltySiamese's message first: "I'm borrowing my brother for a few days! I spared a goblin's life when it crossed our path on our way south (we already killed off so many of them anyway) and it told me about a treasure that was stolen from its tribe! We spent the afternoon tracking the culprit, but discovered that it was already sold, so now we have to infiltrate some lord's manor or something to get it back!"

Danika chuckled and replied: "Ok." Unless SaltySiamese was planning to give it to the goblin tribe, weren't they just stealing it from its new owner?

She read MatchlessMinion's message next: "My sister asked me to steal something for her, and Shrubbery had already done her tree thing and gone to work on her garden anyway, so I agreed. I hope you'll re-add me after!"

Danika sent back: "Sure, good luck. :) "

Shrubbery's message read: "I'm catching up on chores I let slide during the Christmas event. My mom is home again (it's a good thing) so I'll be on and off a lot. I've been showing her my garden here in 'Living Jade Empire' and she says it's really cool!"

Danika replied: "That's great, it is very cool!"

The little default messenger bird carried a small message from Logical Heart: "It's ready. You can activate the contract any time."

Danika swiped through her menu screens to the contracts, and opened the one she had with Logical Heart. She tapped the "Complete" and the little default bird returned a moment later and dropped a small pebble into her clawed hands. It was only a quarter of the size of the dark stone that Aishin had chosen and she could hold it while flying. Logical Heart seemed like a very thoughtful person.

She hesitated, and then accepted Aishin's message before taking her first peek into her new space. It read: "My guild suddenly has a ton of contracts to complete, so I'm going to be busy every time I can play for awhile. On the plus side, I'm able to demand ingredients for the familiar spell as payments (you haven't changed your mind right?) And I've refused all the contracts for your friends ;) and Justin the Grey. Thankfully no one seems to realize that we're the ones who enabled him to pretty much destroy the goblin fortress himself."

Danika laughed, even though she felt a little disappointed that she wouldn't get to play with him for awhile. She quickly replied: "I haven't changed my mind! I have a snowflake, and I was thinking I'd try growing the plants it needs fresh leaves from? I got my stone

today, so I'm going to try to send yours back to you with this message." She poked around for a bit before discovering that she simply needed to be holding the dark stone to be able to drop it into the message screen where it became an icon. This time when she sent the message a notification popped up asking if she were willing to pay the three Karma the transfer required. Danika accepted and the little gray bird flitted off cheerfully with a normal looking message.

Danika set her own little green grey pebble down and then laughed. She didn't know the entrance word. She tried, "greenheart", "pebbleheart", "greengreypebble" and several other things before messaging Logical Heart: "What's the entrance word, and is there anything else I need to know?"

The little gray bird flitted off once again without any sign of complaint, and returned a few minutes later with: "Oh. The instructions are inside it. Dragonheart."

Danika grinned and laid her little clawed hand against her pebble and whispered "dragonheart".

## *(Side Story) Three Goblin Cats*

*[[Posted after Chapter 70 Christmas Goblins]]*

Three cats traveled cheerfully east, and ever farther from goblin territory. The smallest one was black, one was a tabby, and the last was a large orange striped cat wearing a metal band around one foreleg.

The large orange cat complained, "We're totally out of coin now, why did you have to make such an extravagant promise?"

The little black cat flicked an ear in annoyance and replied, "That fairy dragon was a player, and still a novice like us, it seemed really unlikely that we'd really get turned into cats."

The tabby cat commented, "The thief she was with, that Chinchillamin, seemed pretty dangerous though, and was already proficient. You have to have at least 75 skill points to reach proficient, he must have been playing since the game went public."

The orange cat replied, "I had no idea there was such a thing as a Chinchillamin! He was soooo fluffy. I wish I could afford to reincarnate as one, but we've been killed twice since this event started, and I don't even have enough Karma left to revive."

"I definitely don't," agreed the tabby. "That's why being cats for a couple of weeks in the game is worth every coin we spent. No one will recognize us like this!"

The little black cat pointed out, "But, if they use their menu lens, they'll see that our character's race is still goblin instead of cat."

The three cats fell silent as they considered her words. After a moment the little black cat halted and sat down on the path. The other two stopped beside him. "What is it?" The tabby asked.

"I think," the black cat replied uncertainly, "that maybe we should avoid towns until the event is over?"

The big orange cat eyed the forest that bordered this section of the path and asked nervously, "Can we even fight anything bigger than a squirrel in this form? My character sheet says I have a new subpath skill called claw swipe, but I've only got one skill point in it, and my slingshot and sword skills are greyed out."

The tabby suggested, "Maybe we should head back toward the farmlands around Fogton? Farmers like cats right? And most of them should be NPCs I'd think?"

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While later the three cats, who had retraced their steps, and were now cautiously traveling west into the heart of the human kingdom stopped again when they spotted a little white mouse standing in the middle of the broad path. It gazed at them with incongruous bravery.

The little black cat hissed and arched her back. She looked just as shocked by her



own action as the other two cats, who both stepped back with wide eyes. She swallowed and explained quickly, "I just told it to," she hissed and arched her back again.

The tabby flicked his tail and exclaimed, "It's a filter! I bet she said," he hissed and arched his back, "like she always does when she's ticked off." He laughed silently and then added, "Laughter is filtered too!"

The little white mouse commented, "Well, this isn't going as planned, but why don't the three of you just concede now?"

All three cats turned and hissed at it.

Hundreds of little white mice crept out of the hedges bordering the path, and the three cats dropped their poses and huddled together. The little black cat said, "Um, why don't we just log off now and play again tomorrow?"

The two cats who'd stood at her back vanished, and a moment later she followed them offline.

A fatter mouse said with disgust, "They escaped! I told you we should have attacked first and made our demands later!"

Another little mouse adjusted its spectacles and suggested, "Let's try getting a cow instead, they are also welcome in dairies?"

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The next day the large orange striped goblin cat logged in cautiously, only after the mobile version informed him that the two friends in "Living Jade Empire" that he'd formed a party with were already online. He appeared on the same path, in the same spot where the mice had appeared the day before, but he was alone.

He quickly pulled up his menus and checked, both members of his party were online. He sent a quick message to each asking: "Where are you?"

The girl's messenger animal arrived with a reply a moment later. The orange cat accepted the message from the large owl who normally appeared cute and fluffy to him, but right now looked like the predator that it had been modeled after. It read: "Follow the stone fence that's a little way back to the east, south until you see the pond. We picked up a quest to help a little girl catch fish."

The orange cat shrugged his shoulders and followed her instructions. At the stone wall that fenced a tilled field off from the pastures around it, he leapt gracefully onto the wall and trotted south until he spotted a pond in the pasture to the southwest.

When the orange cat arrived, his friends informed him that the human girl had accidentally released a goldfish into the pond that was supposed to be seeded with only sunfish. It had multiplied into dozens of goldfish that were competing with the sunfish for food and space. The girl needed to remove all of the goldfish before the sunfish were ready to harvest in the fall, or she'd be punished, and she'd offered them cheese in addition to the Karma that every quest provided at least one point of.

The girl had brought a barrel out to the pond, and she tied a string to it and had the

cats float out into the pond on it. It was fairly easy to target only goldfish, because they were so brilliantly colored compared to the pale sunfish, but once they'd each caught one, they didn't know what to do.

"Don't tell me she expects us to eat them raw?" the orange cat complained.

The little black cat shrugged, and hooked a claw into the string the girl was holding. She jerked on it until the girl reeled them in. The cats each laid their catch down a couple of meters from the pond and looked at her expectantly.

After a long moment the girl stepped forward and gingerly lifted one of the flopping goldfish by its tail. She slammed it's head against a large rock, and it went still. "Ok, good job. I'll bury them beneath the orchard trees like my father does with the mud flavored carp he catches for fun." She repeated the action with the other two fish and then set out the barrel and waited for the cats to board it again.

When they were back out on the water, the tabby goblin cat murmured, "I half expected one of those goldfish to beg for its life like in the fairytales."

The little black cat replied, "Yeah, but this is ok too." Her paw flicked into the water and came up with another goldfish and she said smugly, "So polite you two are, letting ladies go first, but catch faster?"

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They caught the last goldfish on their last day as cats, and when the large orange cat lifted it out of the water, it begged, "Please spare me! I'm the last of my line!"

The three goblins who'd been turned into cats exchanged glances, and the tabby complained, "This game is too predictable sometimes!"

## ***Author's Note***

This ebook of my webnovel was made possible with the support of my patrons on my new page at [patreon.com/gusdefrog](https://patreon.com/gusdefrog).

Special thanks to my friends Christine and Dennis who were not only supportive of this endeavor, but keep inviting me to SCA things despite all of the times I don't go anywhere.

This is by far the biggest writing project I've ever attempted. Ever. In my entire life, yes, including college, etc.

I get too frustrated when drawing with my wavering vision these days, and so... If a picture is worth a thousand words, then here are a hundred pictures, and I'm already working on the next hundred.

And as always, this would never have been put into words without Steelsoul who once said I could write something he'd read over and over, SmilingNordic and the colour yellow, Wen Spencer's descriptions of her writing methods, and of course my friends and my family who managed to keep me alive and sheltered and provided the writing tools.

Thank you for reading. Luck in your adventures.

GusDeFrog | K.A.H.D.